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Economy and Infrastructure Committee



Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria

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Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee

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About the Committee

Functions

The functions of the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with agriculture, commerce, infrastructure, industry, major projects, public sector finances, transport and education.

The Economy and Infrastructure Committee may inquire into, hold public hearings, consider and report on any Bills or draft Bills referred by the Legislative Council, annual reports, estimates of expenditure or other documents laid before the Legislative Council in accordance with an Act, provided these are relevant to its functions.

Government Departments allocated for oversight:

- Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
- Department of Transport
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Terms of reference

Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria

On 2 September 2020 the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this house requires the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by no later than November 2021, on extending school buses for use by the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians, including, but not limited to:

- (1) an independent analysis of the transport disadvantages experienced by regional and rural Victorians, specifically youth, the elderly and low-income households;
- (2) investigating the potential social and community impacts of improving mobility options by widening the mainstream school bus system and an analysis of the examples and trials from other jurisdictions both locally and overseas;
- (3) investigating technology and systems that would be effective in ensuring child safety on mainstream school buses;
- (4) identifying any existing or potential barriers to allowing public access to the mainstream school bus network;
- (5) identifying the spare capacity of existing assets in the school bus program and how that might be used to enhance public transport options in regional and rural Victoria; and
- (6) investigating the costs of extending mainstream school buses to the general public and how a fare system would function.

Chair's foreword

Victoria's School Bus Program is at the heart of education in rural and regional Victoria. Since 1944, the program has safely transported generations of school students in rural and regional areas across the State.

The key message of this report is that the School Bus Program must remain, first and foremost, a service dedicated to school students. That is how it was designed and that is how it must always stay.

Although the Committee has recommended expanding access to school buses for the general public, the Committee is firm in its belief that no students should be disadvantaged by changes to the School Bus Program.

It is also important to emphasise that our recommendations should only be viewed as a small part of the solution to transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. We know that young people, the elderly and low-income households experience transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas. Providing public transport to small populations that must travel large distances to access services and employment is a significant challenge for all governments.

That is why we should always be searching for new and innovative ways of delivering public transport in rural and regional Victoria. As such, the Committee has recommended the Victorian Government look at making greater use of school buses during 'downtime' where possible and better inform local communities of existing spare capacity.

Throughout this Inquiry, safety issues have been at the forefront of our discussions. The recommendations in this report have been designed so that parents can be assured that their children are safe when travelling on school buses with members of the public. Child safety is paramount.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the many people who contributed their experiences and ideas to this Inquiry. We heard from parents and young people, transport professionals and academics, as well as local councils from across Victoria. This report could not have been written without their invaluable evidence.

I would like to acknowledge the work of my fellow Committee members throughout this Inquiry. Thank you also to our secretariat staff, Justine Donohue, Caitlin Connally, Kieran Crowe and Patrick O'Brien, for their help producing this report.

I commend this report to the Parliament.

Enver Erdogan

Mr Enver Erdogan MLC
Chair

Executive summary

Chapter 1—Victoria’s School Bus Program

Victoria’s School Bus Program provides free transport for students in rural and regional Victoria to attend their nearest primary or secondary school. The general public may use the School Bus Program provided they meet eligibility criteria, meet certain child safety requirements, pay a fare, and there is seating capacity for them on the bus.

This Inquiry examined options for facilitating greater access for the public to use the School Bus Program to provide more transport options for people in rural and regional Victoria.

Chapter 2—Transport disadvantage and public transport in rural and regional Victoria

People in rural and regional Victoria are more reliant on private vehicles to meet their transport needs than people in metropolitan areas. This is due to less public transport availability and greater distances between population centres in rural and regional areas.

The Committee examined the disadvantages experienced by young people, seniors and people on low incomes in rural and regional Victoria who lack access to private vehicles and sufficient public transport. The Committee found these groups have difficulty accessing education, employment, essential services and social opportunities.

Chapter 3—Expanding public access on Victoria’s School Bus Program

Greater public access to the School Bus Program could be facilitated in two ways. The first is on school journeys (known as live runs), the second is during the day when students are at school (known as downtime). However, neither of these should be considered a key solution to transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria.

Importantly, students must remain the prime focus of the School Bus Program. For live runs, the Committee determined that there should be no change to the policy that prioritises students over the general public. In addition, school bus routes should not be altered to suit the transport needs of the general public, as changing routes would make trips longer and disadvantage students. The Committee does not believe it would be appropriate to compromise dedicated student transport to create better public transport outcomes.

The safety of students interacting with the general public on live runs was a major concern of parents and school communities who participated in this Inquiry. The Committee identified several measures, such as Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) and dedicated seating for adult passengers, that would enhance child safety. While child safety concerns are understandable, the Committee was told that child safety risks in relation to adult passengers are low and that there have been no reported examples of child sexual abuse by an adult passenger on a school bus in Victoria.

The main way in which access for the general public to the School Bus Program on live runs can be improved is the application process. This process is currently burdensome and mostly paper-based. It can be improved by the faster rollout of the online application system called the School Bus Management Program.

Some school buses may be able to offer public transport style trips during the day while students are at school or at other times such as school holidays (downtime). However, the Committee learned that the Transport Standards made under the *Disability Discrimination Act 2002* (Cth) are a barrier to this idea. Under these regulations, school buses used as public transport during downtime would have to be accessible to people with a disability. The Committee was told that only 2% of school buses are currently accessible to people with a disability and the cost of converting the fleet would be considerable. Further research would also be needed to understand the fuel and driver costs of running school buses during downtime.

Two considerations to running services during downtime are: whether allowing operators to set and keep fares would incentivise them to run services; and whether a proportion of the fare should also go to participating schools.

Findings and recommendations

2 Transport disadvantage and public transport in rural and regional Victoria

FINDING 1: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst young people in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- post-secondary education
- employment
- essential services, including youth services.

23

FINDING 2: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst seniors in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- essential services
- social activities.

27

FINDING 3: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst people on low incomes in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- post-secondary education
- employment
- essential services.

29

FINDING 4: Public transport in rural and regional Victoria requires more funding per capita compared to metropolitan areas due to greater geographic distance between population centres and lower population density.

33

FINDING 5: Although the School Bus Program could be modified to offer increased access to the general public, the program is not a suitable solution to transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria.

36

3 Expanding public access on Victoria’s School Bus Program

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government explore options to:

- inform local communities of spare capacity on school buses, before downsizing buses on School Bus Program routes with declining patronage
- convert under-utilised School Bus Program services to public transport routes in areas with high demand, where the school buses comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002.

42

RATIONALE: It should be determined if capacity on school buses can or cannot be filled by the general public before decisions are made about bus sizes. Similarly, it may be possible to use buses that are compliant with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 for public transport in areas of high demand.

42

FINDING 6: The School Bus Program is underutilised by post-secondary students and young apprentices. The Department of Education and Training could address this by increasing the promotion of the School Bus Program to inform young people in rural and regional Victoria of their options.

44

FINDING 7: The evidence presented to the Committee indicates that the incidence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adult passengers against children on school buses is either non-existent or extremely rare in Victoria. This is also true of other jurisdictions the Committee was informed about which have a higher number of adult passengers, such as New South Wales and Queensland.

48

FINDING 8: The evidence provided to the Committee suggests that bullying between students using the current School Bus Program is a prevalent threat to child welfare.

49

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government direct individual school bus networks to allocate seating for the general public at the front of the bus where capacity allows. This policy should only be pursued where it does not impact student access to the bus.

51

RATIONALE: Sitting the general public in the front of a bus provides assurances to parents about child safety.

51

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government mandate a requirement for CCTV cameras to be installed on new school buses as they come into operation in the School Bus Program. 52

RATIONALE: CCTV cameras provide assurances to parents about child safety and can be used to gather evidence of incidents. 52

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government, when helping school bus operators to implement the new Child Safe Standards in 2022, ensure that parents, school communities and young people have input in the formulation of Child Safe Policies. Such policies should be communicated widely to parents, school communities and young people. 58

RATIONALE: It is good policy to include a wide variety of stakeholders when developing child safety standards. This also gives parents further assurances about the safety of their children on school buses. 58

FINDING 9: Changes to School Bus Program routes and timetables to suit the transport needs of the general public would disadvantage school students and should not be pursued. 61

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government streamline the application process for the general public to use the School Bus Program, looking in particular at whether both a Working with Children Check and a verbal reference are required. 64

RATIONALE: The current application process is a barrier to the general public accessing the School Bus Program. It is unlikely that both a Working with Children Check and a verbal reference are needed. 64

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government progress the roll out of the School Bus Management System statewide as a matter of urgency. 66

RATIONALE: The School Bus Management System will make applying to use the School Bus Program much easier by replacing the outdated paper form with an online application. 66

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government ensure the School Bus Management System allows members of the public to know if there is spare capacity on their desired School Bus Program route before they begin an application to use a bus. **66**

RATIONALE: Currently, members of the general public must apply to use the School Bus Program before being informed of spare capacity. This order should be reversed to allow potential applicants to know if there is spare capacity before applying. **67**

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government identify which components of the New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program can be adapted for use in Victoria, in particular the use of real-time data. **68**

RATIONALE: The New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program uses much more modern technology than Victoria’s School Bus Program. Much of this technology would be useful in Victoria. **68**

FINDING 10: School buses that conduct public transport trips during downtime while children are at school are not exempt from the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002. **71**

FINDING 11: The cost of requiring Victoria’s School Bus Program bus fleet to comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 for the purpose of public transport during downtime would be considerable. Further, the needs of young people with disability are targeted by specific programs, such as the Students with Disabilities Transport Program. **74**

FINDING 12: There is a potential for school buses to be used during downtime to provide on-demand public transport services in rural and regional Victoria. However, careful consideration is needed to determine the commercial viability of on-demand bus services. **80**

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government, in consultation with local communities in rural and regional Victoria, consider the potential for the School Bus Program to form part of an integrated transport policy that makes use of technology and innovative service models, such as on-demand transport. **82**

RATIONALE: Integrated transport should be driven by the needs of local communities. They are best placed to inform decisions made by the Victorian Government and should be consulted before an integrated transport policy is developed. **83**

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary Inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee at the Parliament of Victoria.

We received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A Parliamentary Committee is not part of the Government. Our Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues. We also examine government policies and the actions of the public service.

You can learn more about the Committee's work, including all of its current and past inquiries, at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/eic-lc>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/eic-lc/article/4617>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations we have made. The response is public and put on the inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/eic-lc/article/4618>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

1.1 Introduction

This Chapter provides an overview of Victoria's School Bus Program, including information about:

- the network routes of the School Bus Program
- the eligibility criteria to access the program for students and the general public, as well as an overview of the priority of access within the School Bus Program
- the roles and responsibilities of the Victorian Government, participating schools and service providers in administering and implementing the program.

The Chapter also outlines the proposal put forward in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference to facilitate the use of school buses by the general public to enhance the mobility of rural and regional Victorians.

1.2 Victoria's School Bus Program

Victoria's School Bus Program assists with the transport needs of families in rural and regional Victoria by providing a free bus service in areas where there is insufficient public transport for students to travel to and from their nearest primary or secondary school.

The School Bus Program began in 1944.¹ A paper by the Department of Transport² stated that the scheme was intended to help children in remote areas where the construction of schools was not economically feasible, allowing them to access schools in larger regional centres.³ The Committee also heard that the program was initiated to encourage soldiers returning from World War Two to take up farming in regional areas.⁴

Until 1969, the School Bus Program was only available to public high school and technical school students and a limited number of primary schools. In 1969, the service was extended to all rural and regional primary schools.⁵ Limited access for the general public began in 1991, allowing post-secondary students between the ages of 15 and 24 and other members of the public access to spare seats on school buses with the

1 Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p. 6.

2 The paper is the Bus and Regional Services Division Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, 2010.

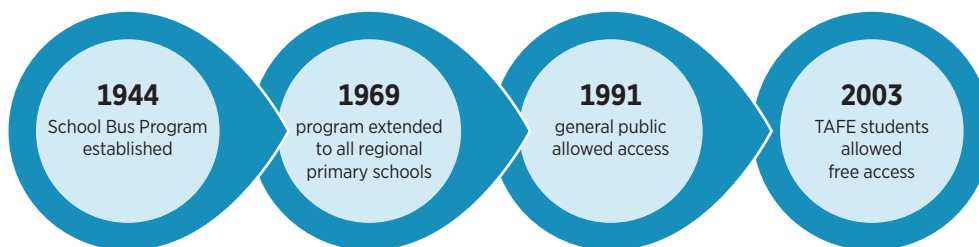
3 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4 Graeme Sandlant, Sandlant Bus, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

5 Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, p. 5.

payment of a fare. In 2003, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) students were allowed free travel on school buses if there is spare capacity.⁶ Figure 1.1 below shows the timeline of key events.

Figure 1.1 A timeline of the key events related to the School Bus Program



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Department of Transport, Bus and Regional Services Division, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, 2010, pp. 5–6.

When the School Bus Program began in 1944, it had 136 services carrying 4,600 students.⁷ It now carries around 58,000 students each year on 1,454 buses.⁸ Primary school aged children make up most of the travellers, with 47% of the routes carrying primary school aged children only. The rest of the routes carry a mix of primary and secondary school students.⁹

The Department of Education and Training advised the Committee about the numbers of the general public, post-secondary school students and pre-school travellers on the School Bus Program in 2021. There were:

- 6 general adult travellers, which represents 0.01% of total passengers
- 137 post-secondary school students, which represents 0.4% of total passengers
- 225 pre-school students, which represents 0.45% of total passengers.¹⁰

The Department noted that the information was collected from a survey of participating schools with a 60% response rate.¹¹

The School Bus Program reaches almost every corner of Victoria. Combined, school buses travel 31.1 million kilometres per year, more than double the 14.3 million kilometres travelled by rural and regional public transport route bus services.¹² Figure 1.2 shows the coverage of Victoria's public transport network and Figure 1.3 shows the coverage of Victoria's public transport network, including school bus routes.

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation: Inquiry into the use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria*, supplementary evidence received 17 September 2021, p. 4.

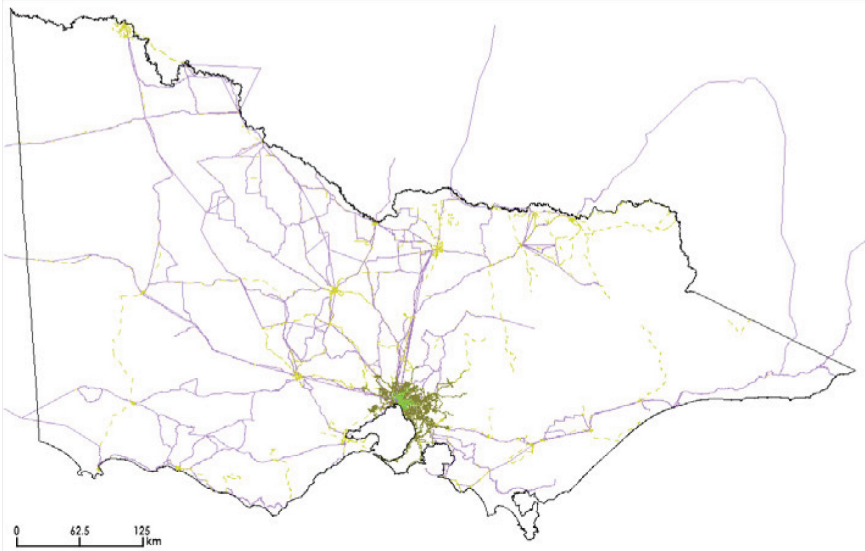
⁹ Tony Bates, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 September 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 5 November 2021, p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

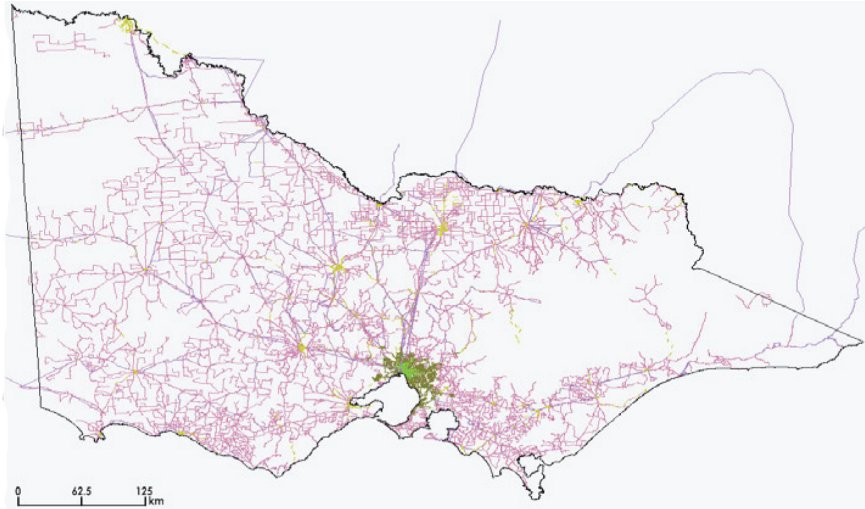
¹² Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p. 6.

Figure 1.2 The coverage of Victoria's public transport network



Source: Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p.12.

Figure 1.3 The coverage of Victoria's public transport network and school bus routes



Source: Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p.12.

There are 300 school bus networks across the State.¹³ Each school bus route is part of a network comprised of a coordinating school and, at times, client schools. The coordinating school oversees the administration of the network, including the enrolment of students into the program and keeping information on routes and passenger numbers. Client schools forward the information to the principal of the coordinating school or their delegate, known as a school bus coordinator.¹⁴ At the time of writing, there were 88 school bus coordinators who were based in schools that administer larger school bus networks. For small networks, or where there is just one

¹³ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program Policy*, Melbourne, 2020, p. 18. (Note, this policy was updated in 2020.)

school in the bus network, the principal administers the enrolments, route information and passenger numbers. In some cases, the Department of Education and Training funds time release for teachers to help administer the bus network, such as:

- during busy times when students apply to access a bus the following year
- to supervise bus interchanges in large regional centres during travel peak periods.¹⁵

The roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders in the School Bus Program is discussed in Section 1.5.

Victoria's school bus networks are serviced by 420 bus operators,¹⁶ some of which are multi-generational family businesses that have been in operation since the program began.¹⁷ In its submission, Bus Association Victoria described the nature of some of the school bus operator businesses:

The operators of school bus services in regional and rural Victoria are mainly transgenerational, small to medium mixed family businesses who are very much community leaders. The long-term nature of family firm bus operators is one of their key characteristics, as they tend to have lengthy tenures and anticipate long careers, not only for themselves but also for their children.¹⁸

Buses are contracted to provide services for four hours in the morning to take children to school and four hours in the evening to take children home from school.¹⁹

The cost of the School Bus Program, according to the Department of Transport, is \$230 million per year.²⁰ This is relatively inexpensive in comparison to public transport services in rural and regional Victoria, which in 2019–20 cost \$807 million to operate (excluding fare recovery).²¹ Public transport spending in rural and regional Victoria accounts for 25% of Victoria's total operating costs but only supports 6% of trips.²²

In addition to the School Bus Program, there are other transport programs which assist rural and regional students, including:

- The Students with Disabilities Transport Program which provides bus or taxi transport for students with a disability attending their designated government specialist school.²³ This program caters for approximately 9,000 students per year.²⁴

¹⁵ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Public Transport Victoria, *The Future of School Bus Administration in Victoria*, presentation to the National Travel to Learn and School Bus Summit, 27 June 2018, Canberra.

¹⁷ Chris Lowe, Executive Director, Bus Association Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Victorian Principals Association, *Submission 70*, p. 5.

²⁰ Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services, Department of Transport, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 September 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15. Although other stakeholders have suggested the cost of the program is \$300 million; see Stanley and Stanley, 'The humble school bus', *An opportunity for improving regional mobility*, 2020. p. 11; Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 12.

²¹ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051: Volume 1*, Infrastructure Victoria, Melbourne, 2021, p. 230.

²² Ibid.

²³ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, pp. 3–4.

²⁴ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

- The Conveyance Allowance Program which provides financial assistance to families to help cover transport costs where the School Bus Program does not operate.²⁵ This program caters for approximately 37,000 students per year.²⁶
- School service specials which are public transport buses that provide additional capacity and/or route deviations to help students get to and from school during school pick up and drop off times.²⁷ School service specials operate in both metropolitan and regional areas.

The School Bus Program is highly valued by students, parents, and school communities in rural and regional Victoria. Mr Graeme Sandlandt, the owner of Sandlandt Bus, told the Committee:

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 ...²⁸

Mr Kevin Phillips, a consultant for the Country Education Partnership, a peak body for regional schools, outlined the support of school communities for the School Bus Program. He said: 'There is obviously a great degree of support given to the bus service. Parents trust it, schools trust it. They have faith in it and they believe in it ...'²⁹

The evidence presented to the Committee shows that the School Bus Program is highly valued across rural and regional Victoria. The Committee has kept this front of mind when considering the issues set out in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

1.3 Eligibility criteria and priority of access for the School Bus Program

The key eligibility criteria for the School Bus Program state that students must:

- lack public transport options to travel to school
- travel to their nearest appropriate school
- live more than 4.8 km from their school
- be of school age and reside in Victoria.³⁰

²⁵ Department of Education and Training, *Conveyance Allowance Program*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/conveyance-allowance/policy>> accessed 27 September 2021.

²⁶ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

²⁷ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 3.

²⁸ Graeme Sandlant, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

²⁹ Kevin Phillips, Consultant, Country Education Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

³⁰ Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program (Guidance)*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/guidance>> accessed 10 March 2021.

Those who do not meet the eligibility criteria, for example, a student who does not attend their closest school, may still access the service but only if there is capacity after eligible students have booked their seats. They must also pay a fare.

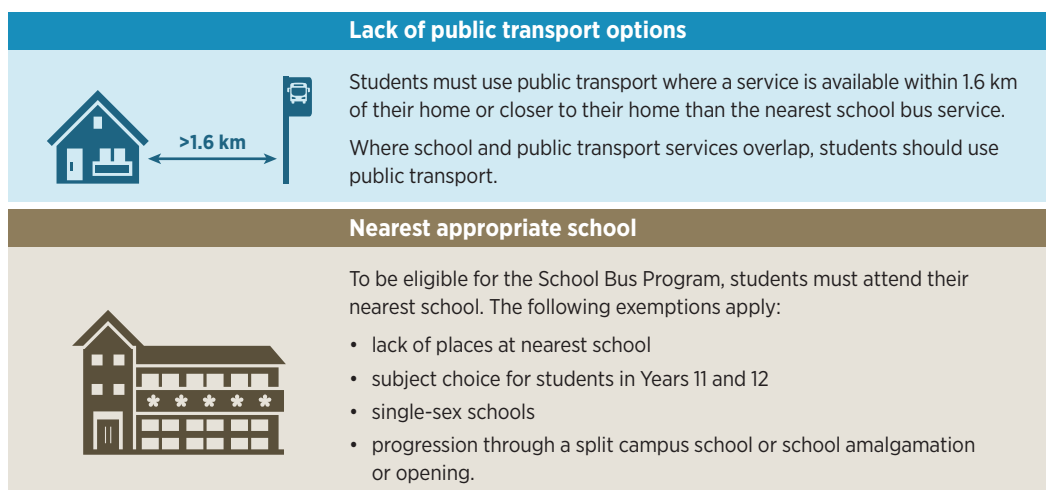
There is a hierarchy of priority to access the School Bus Program. Eligible students attending public schools are the first priority. If there is capacity on the bus once they have been catered for, then students from non-government schools may apply. Students who have an arrangement which exempts them from the eligibility criteria are next, followed by fare paying students. Finally, once demand from all school students is met, if there are spare seats, the general public may apply for a seat on the bus. This includes TAFE and other post-secondary students.

1.3.1 Eligibility criteria

The School Bus Program's eligibility criteria are established under Victoria's Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017, which are made under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)*.³¹

The Department of Education and Training's *School Bus Program Guidance*³² provides further information about the administrative, operational, and policy requirements for students, families, schools, bus operators and Departments.³³ Figure 1.4 below outlines the eligibility criteria for students to access the School Bus Program.

Figure 1.4 Eligibility criteria for students to access the School Bus Program



³¹ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 5.

³² This can be found at Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program (Guidance)*.

³³ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 5.

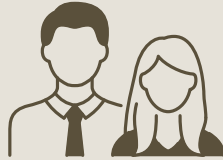
Live 4.8 km or more from school



Students must reside more than 4.8 km from the school they are attending. This distance is judged too far for students to be able to walk or ride to school and thus necessitate a bus.

The distance is measured by the shortest practicable route by car from the student's residential driveway to the school gate.

Be of school age and reside in Victoria



5-18 years old

Students must reside in Victoria and be eligible to attend school. This is most commonly children between 5 and 18 years old.

There are exemptions for students who live in New South Wales or South Australia but attend Victorian schools, post-secondary students and apprentices, as well as pre-school students who have turned four. These exemptions are granted where seating is available and other eligibility criteria are met.

Multiple bus routes



Students may only access one bus service unless the coordinating principal approves the student's travel because the student:

- resides at more than one address
- is attending a training program not at the school.

Where connecting bus services or bus interchanges exist, a student may be allowed to access more than one service to get to their school.

Non-government schools



Non-government school students are approved to travel subject to spare seating being available. Once eligible non-government students have been granted access to a service, they have ongoing travel rights that are equal to those of eligible government students until they either finish their schooling or change address.

Upon approval, eligible non-government school students are allocated to an existing service where spare capacity exists. Students who cannot be seated on existing services may be waitlisted until space becomes available.

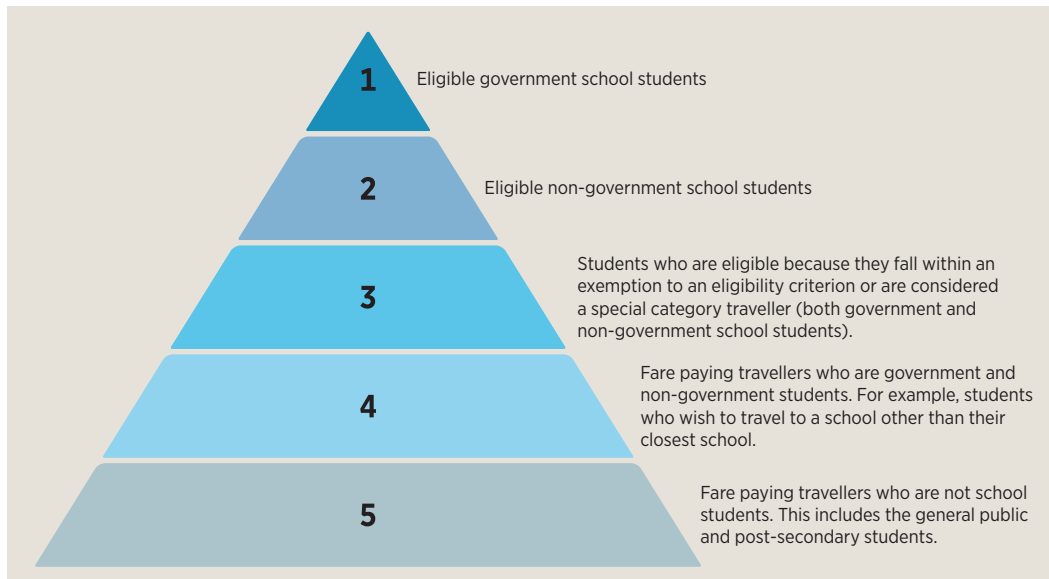
Non-government school students cannot, on their own, form a case for a new school bus route, or modifications of routes. The nearest 'appropriate' school for students attending non-government schools is determined by the nearest appropriate religious denomination of a school for a particular student.

Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program: Guidance*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/guidance>> accessed 10 March 2021.

1.3.2 Priority of access

As noted in Section 1.3, the Department of Education and Training's *School Bus Program Guidance* provides a list of priority for students and the general public accessing the School Bus Program. This applies where demand for seats exceeds the capacity of the bus, Figure 1.5 below outlines the priority of access for the School Bus Program.

Figure 1.5 Priority of access for the School Bus Program



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program: Guidance*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/guidance>> accessed 10 March 2021.

An appeals process exists for students who do not get a place on the bus because they do not meet the eligibility criteria or because there is no spare capacity on the service they wish to access. Families may apply to the Transport Special Case Consideration Panel administered by the Department of Education and Training. The panel meets throughout the year to consider the requests of families asking for special consideration of their circumstances.³⁴

1.4 Access for the general public to the School Bus Program


The general public are permitted to use the School Bus Program if there is capacity once all school students have been catered for and a fare is paid. Most school bus routes require a paper application form to be filled in that includes the submission of a Working with Children Check and details for verbal references. A copy of the form that the general public uses to apply to use a school bus is included in Appendix B. The application process for members of the public to use school buses is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Figure 1.6 below outlines the eligibility criteria for the general public to access the School Bus Program.

³⁴ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Figure 1.6 Eligibility criteria for the general public to access the School Bus Program

The School Bus Program's eligibility criteria for the general public



- the person must live at least 1.6 km from suitable public transport
- seating is available on the service after all students with a higher priority of access to services have been accommodated
- the applicant (and the parent/carer if under 18 years of age) accepts the conditions of travel and the authority of the coordinating principal
- a fare is paid in advance of travel
- the Department of Transport incurs no additional cost
- the applicant (or parent/carer if under 18 years of age) provides a written undertaking to the coordinating principal that other transport arrangements will be made if seating becomes insufficient due to an increase in the number of students with a higher priority of access to travel or a smaller vehicle is engaged for the service
- no ad-hoc or occasional travel is to be provided to members of the general public.

Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program: Guidance*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/guidance>> accessed 10 March 2021.

To use a school bus, the general public must apply to the coordinating school of the bus network they wish to travel on. An application form must be completed that asks applicants to provide verbal reference checks and a Working with Children's Check. The forms also require the applicant to choose the days on which they will travel, a bus stop to travel from and details of medical issues and emergency contact details.³⁵

The form outlines conditions of travel that members of the public must agree to, which include:

- alternative arrangements must be made if seating becomes insufficient after students with prior rights to travel are accommodated
- access to the bus service is subject to review at the end of each term
- members of the public may not form a case or part of a case for the retention, extension or addition of services, or a route or timetable alteration, or the provision of a larger vehicle.³⁶

The coordinating principal may withdraw approval for a member of the public to travel on a school bus where the principal considers it necessary to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students traveling on the service.³⁷

Some parts of Victoria can apply to use the School Bus Program online through the School Bus Management System. However, the system is relatively new and has only been rolled out to 12 out of 300 school bus networks so far.³⁸ The system also

³⁵ Department of Education and Training, *Form 4: Application for Permission to Travel – General Public*, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/form-4-application-for-permission-to-travel-general-public.docx>> accessed 13 September 2021.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 16 September 2021, p. 2.

requires applicants to provide the same information as the paper application process. The School Bus Management System is examined in Chapter 3.

Members of the public accessing the program must pay a fare to use school buses. Because members of the public must book a seat on the bus for a term or a year, the fares are charged on a per-term or per-year basis. The bus fares are:

- \$120 per-term
- \$480 per-year.³⁹

The fares must be paid in advance of the school term or year to the coordinating school. There is no refund if a person does not use the bus on the days for which they have paid. There is no facility for members of the public to pay fares on a per-journey basis. Fares are discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.5 Governance and administration

The School Bus Program is primarily administered and operated by the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Transport. However, participating schools and bus operators also have roles and responsibilities. The responsibilities of each stakeholder is as follows:

- The Department of Education and Training provides policy including eligibility criteria and priority of access, planning for service needs, and administration of the Transport Special Case Consideration Panel.⁴⁰
- The Department of Transport procures and manages bus operator contracts.⁴¹
- Participating schools are responsible for communication with students and families, eligibility determination, fare collection as well as assistance with planning service needs.⁴²
- Bus operators are responsible for delivery and management of service provision and assist with planning service needs.⁴³

The School Bus Program is guided by the relevant parts of the Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 and the *Bus Safety Act 2009* (Vic).⁴⁴

Victoria is unique in administering its School Bus Program jointly between two Departments. Most other state jurisdictions in Australia manage their School Bus

³⁹ Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program (Guidance)*.

⁴⁰ Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program, Policy Guidance*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/policy>> accessed 10 March 2021.

⁴¹ Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 1.

⁴² Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program (Guidance)*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Program via a single Department.⁴⁵ The Committee was informed that in Victoria the responsibilities are split between two Departments because its components relate to the policy expertise of both the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Transport. It did not receive evidence of any problems with this approach.

1.6 Issues with the current School Bus Program that are outside of the Terms of Reference

The Committee was provided with evidence from some parents and school communities regarding perceived shortcomings with the School Bus Program. This includes:

- lower priority of access for non-government school students
- difficulty in securing new services or changes to existing bus routes
- the requirement for a student to attend their nearest school.⁴⁶

In relation to the priority of access for non-government school students, as noted in Section 1.3.2, non-government school students may use the School Bus Program only if the demand from public school students has been met. Mr Paul Velten, Chief Information and Infrastructure Officer, Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd, who represented Victoria's regional Catholic Dioceses at a public hearing, said that this policy has led to some non-government school students missing out on school bus places:

Access by Catholic students can be dependent upon capacity and eligibility. We have some students that are unable to travel on the School Bus Program due to this capacity issue. There can be students that miss out on a seat on a bus. In fact, it can be a situation where it is one child from a family who is eligible but another is not. It may also be that there is no accessible bus route for our students.⁴⁷

Other submitters told the Committee that it is difficult to request new school bus routes or changes to existing routes. The Victorian Council of Social Service gave the Committee an example of the difficulty experienced by one of its member organisations in getting a school bus route changed to assist a group of disadvantaged students:

For example, one VCOSS member organisation experienced several barriers in successfully extending the school bus route to service a group of students who were being excluded from the school bus route. This was despite evidence that this group of students, many of who were Aboriginal or from low-income households, were not attending school because of transport barriers. The school principal was resistant to updating the route and it took the community organisation over 12 months of negotiating with the private bus operator directly to change the route.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Department of Education, *Review of regional school bus services*, South Australia, 2021, p. 23.

⁴⁶ Mr Paul Velten, Chief Information and Infrastructure Officer, Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 135*, p. 13.

The Committee also heard that families who move out of their current school zone and choose to keep their children at the same school may struggle to keep a place on the school bus service. A parent explained the difficulties they faced after moving to a new house:

My daughters attend St Augustine's in Kyabram, my eldest is grade 6 and youngest is grade 3. We previously lived in Kyabram, where my eldest started school and moved to Harston where a bus was available to the school. Naturally my youngest followed her sister. Due to unforeseen circumstances we were made homeless and had no other option but to live in Tatura with my family. As my girls were loving at St Augustine's and the programs/education they provide, with the possibility of moving back to Kyabram I left at the school. When I enquired about a bus I was told the only option from Tatura was a public V/Line service. The V/Line service would take my children to the Transit centre in Kyabram which is down the Main Street of Kyabram. My 9 and 12 year old children would have to walk the Main Street during the peak hour of traffic crossing major roads on the way to school. There is only one pedestrian crossing they can use and the crossing supervised in front of their school. Still they have to cross two more major roads on their own. If something happens to my children on the way to school there is no way of contacting me and no one to supervise and take responsibility for them. If I place them on the V/Line service they have to make the bus by set times and if they miss it there is no way they can contact me and no family they can go to.⁴⁹

The Committee notes the frustration experienced by some parents and organisations regarding the eligibility criteria, priority of access and route flexibility of the School Bus Program. These issues do not fall within the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry and the Committee has not made recommendations in this regard. However, the Committee encourages the Victorian Government to use the submissions provided to the Committee for this Inquiry that touch on these issues to consider if improvements can be made to the School Bus Program.

1.7 The proposal to make it easier for the general public to access the School Bus Program

The preamble to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference asked the Committee to consider 'extending school buses for use by the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians'.

Part (1) of the Terms of Reference asked the Committee to conduct 'an independent analysis of the transport disadvantages experienced by regional and rural Victorians, specifically youth, the elderly and low-income households'.

Part (2) of the Terms of Reference asked the Committee to investigate 'the potential social and community impacts of improving mobility options by widening the mainstream school bus system' as well as look at whether previous examples and trials of using the school bus system for public transport have produced favourable results.

⁴⁹ Kate Ranson, *Submission 74*, p. 1.

Chapter 2 of this report examines transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria, particularly in relation to seniors, young people and those on low incomes. It includes an analysis about whether reducing the barriers to accessing the School Bus Program would assist their mobility needs and foster positive economic and social outcomes.

The remaining parts of the Terms of Reference, parts (3) to (6), asked the Committee to consider operational and cost issues that may be a barrier to making the School Bus Program easier for the general public to use. This includes child safety issues, administrative and policy blockages, and whether school buses have spare capacity for use by the general public.

In considering how school buses might be used by the general public, the Committee was informed of two broad options for their use:

- for trips alongside school children while they travel to-and-from school (known as live runs)
- for trips outside of school journeys. This includes during the day, while children are at school, as well as school holidays (known as downtime).

Chapter 3 examines existing barriers to accessing the School Bus Program and what the outcomes might be if they were removed. This includes concerns about child safety, addressing whether routes and timetables should be changed to suit the general public as well as whether there is capacity on school buses. In addition, there is consideration of administrative barriers and whether school buses can be used during downtime. Examples of trials of public patronage on school buses and School Bus Programs in other jurisdictions are also considered.

2 Transport disadvantage and public transport in rural and regional Victoria

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter examines transport disadvantage experienced by Victorians living in rural and regional areas, in particular:

- amongst cohorts more likely to experience transport disadvantage, namely –
 - young people
 - older Victorians
 - people on low incomes
- in specific areas where a lack of public transport and transport infrastructure exists.

The Committee found that these cohorts are more vulnerable to experiencing transport disadvantage, especially in rural and regional Victoria where public transport options are more limited. Greater access to the existing School Bus Program could assist the transport needs of some by:

- giving people more transport options, which could assist them with education and employment opportunities, particularly young people
- potentially improving access to essential services.

However, the Committee concluded that the School Bus Program is limited in its ability to deliver public transport in rural and regional Victoria. Low population density and large geographic distance between population centres make public transport difficult to deliver. Fixed school bus routes and other barriers mean that the School Bus Program can only play a small role in addressing transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria.

2.2 What is transport disadvantage?

Transport disadvantage occurs when an individual lacks an appropriate means of transport to access essential services and participate in society. This may lead to social exclusion and poorer social and economic wellbeing.

In its submission, Infrastructure Victoria described transport disadvantage, stating:

‘Transport disadvantage’ refers to the difficulty or inability to access transport – private or public – due to the limited availability of services, or difficulties physically

accessing transport, such as being unable to board a bus or travel to a station. Transport disadvantage can also be experienced when people have difficulty maintaining private transport because of financial stress.¹

Without access to transport, particularly public transport, individuals may face barriers to participating fully in society. This can include exclusion from:

- finding or maintaining employment
- post-secondary education
- health services
- food and personal shopping
- social activities.²

Transport disadvantage can affect rural and regional areas more than metropolitan areas. In rural and regional areas, there are fewer and less frequent public transport services and key social and economic activities such as work, education and shopping are often separated by larger geographic distances.³

In areas with less public transport, reliance on private vehicles is higher. This becomes a problem for people facing affordability issues, age, or medical impediments.⁴

In this Chapter, the Committee considers several issues related to transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. The Chapter examines:

- transport disadvantaged groups, such as:
 - young people
 - seniors
 - people on low incomes
- transport disadvantaged areas.

2.3 Transport disadvantaged groups

The Terms of Reference direct the Committee to consider transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria, particularly among young people, seniors and those on low incomes. These cohorts are more likely to experience transport disadvantage than the general population and those who exhibit more than one of these characteristics are at greater risk.

Figure 2.1 shows the cohorts more likely to experience transport disadvantage and summarises the key characteristics of their disadvantage.




1 Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 8.

2 Ibid.; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 4.

3 Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 8.; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 4.

4 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 6.

Figure 2.1 Transport disadvantage cohorts

| Young people | Seniors | People on low incomes |
|--|--|---|
|  <p>May have difficulties meeting the costs of owning and maintaining a private vehicle.</p> <p>May be too young to hold a drivers licence.</p> |  <p>May have difficulties meeting the costs of owning and maintaining a private vehicle.</p> <p>Age related decline in physical function can lead seniors to cease driving.</p> |  <p>May have difficulties meeting the costs of owning and maintaining a private vehicle.</p> |

Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

2.3.1 Young people

School aged children and young adults to the age of 24 make up 24% of the population in rural and regional Victoria.⁵ These young people experience transport disadvantage more than other demographic groups because:

- their age may preclude them from having a driver licence
- the costs involved with owning and running a private vehicle may be too expensive.

Limited public transport in rural and regional Victoria compounds these issues for young people. In developing its submission, Youth Affairs Council Victoria consulted with young people in rural and regional Victoria regarding the transport disadvantages they face. The submission included the results of a survey completed by 187 young people.⁶

The submission described the poor availability of public transport in rural and regional Victoria as a key issue. Only 30% of young people who responded to Youth Affairs Council Victoria’s survey indicated that they lived near public transport.⁷ The submission stated:

Young people who spoke with YACVic Rural rated the availability public transport to get them to their destination an average 4 out of 10. Three quarters of respondents rated public transport in their area 5 or lower. Very few young people who spoke with YACVic Rural can catch local public transport to university (7 per cent), TAFE (10 per cent), community events (11 per cent), work (14 per cent) or medical appointments (14 per cent).

⁵ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 9.

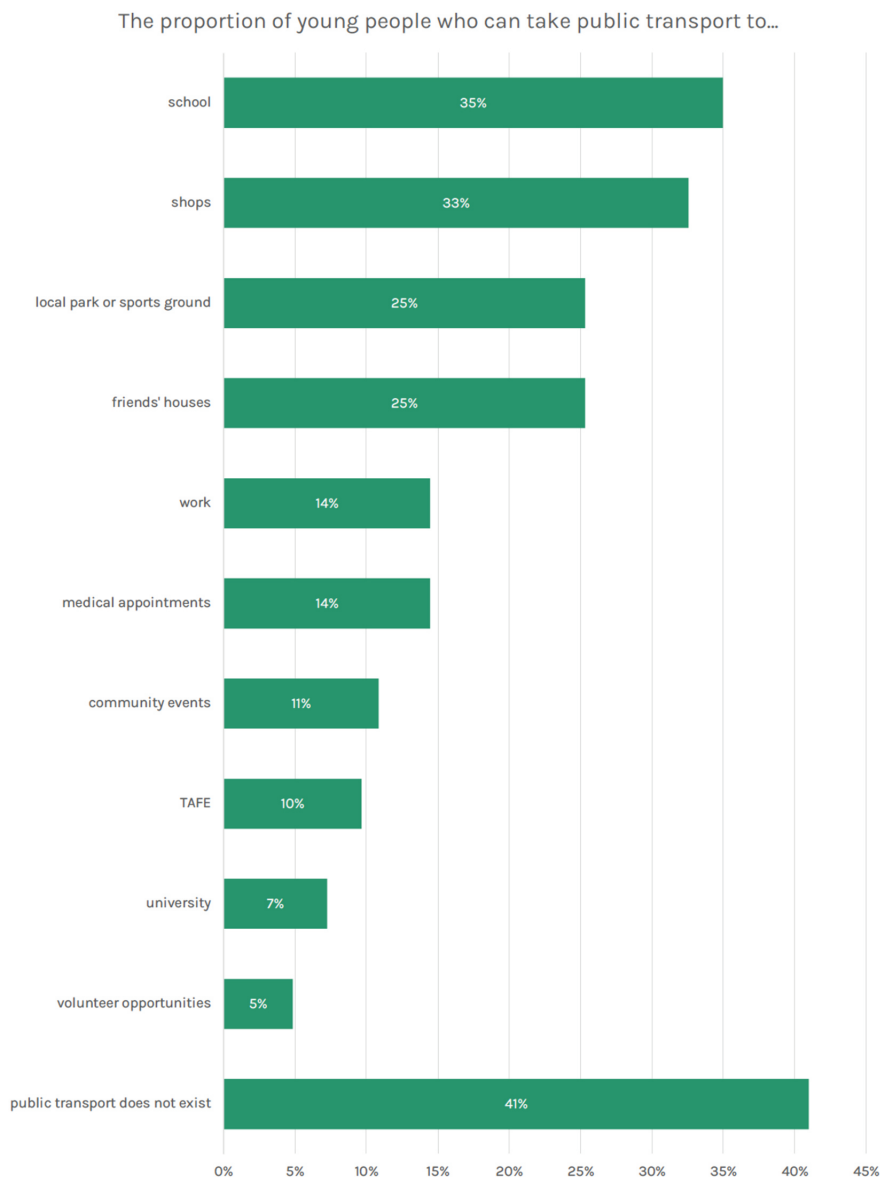
⁶ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Of the young people who spoke to YACVic Rural, 89 per cent reported that they are unable to get to work using public transport. Nearly 90 per cent of young people told us that they could not access their TAFE or university using public transport. Some young people told us that they either had to leave their classes early or wait for extended periods to get home.⁸

Figure 2.2 below shows the proportion of survey respondents who took public transport to various education, work or social activities. It shows that 41% of respondents did not have public transport in their residential area.

Figure 2.2 The proportion of young people who use public transport to access education, work and social activities



Source: Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 13.

8 Ibid.

As stated, a lack of public transport means greater reliance on private vehicles. In its submission, Infrastructure Victoria discussed the difficulties young people face in relying on others for lifts or affordability barriers when purchasing their own car:

Due to the poor public transport options, young regional Victorians are often forced to either ask for a lift from friends or family, or own and maintain their own car. Relying on lifts increases dependence on other people, and can be limiting where long distances are concerned. Owning and maintaining one's own car can be difficult for many young people given the costs involved, contributing to financial stress, and can heavily influence young people's decisions regarding employment and education.⁹

At a public hearing, the Committee spoke to Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health at Federation University, who provided information about financial support provided to students, some of which is for private vehicle use. In response to a question on notice, Professor Unsworth explained that:

In 2021 alone, Federation University Student Financial Support have issued:

- over \$4,000 in vouchers to assist students with the cost of food/fuel
- over \$15,000 in expense related support (such as car registration).
- The team note that the lack of accessible public transport places a significant financial strain on students, often forcing them to run a car they often cannot afford.¹⁰

Another issue related to transport disadvantage experienced by young people is that they cannot get a driver licence until they are 18 years old. This was noted by Mr Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, who said:

And we also know that in rural areas young people who are especially having access to vocational training or apprenticeships are not yet 18, therefore they cannot get a licence. Even if they can get a licence, they do not necessarily have access to a vehicle.¹¹

The Committee was also told that access to a private vehicle was important for a young person's social development. A private vehicle can improve a young person's access to opportunities, whether they are still in school or have recently left. Mr Chris Lowe, Executive Director at Bus Association Victoria, the peak body for the bus industry, said that gaining a driver's licence was so important for Year 12s that schools are concerned about those students that do not have one:

so many principals have told me over the years that if one of their students in Year 12 does not get their licence, they take a very active interest in the welfare of that student, because without your licence you are set to have not as prosperous a life as you deserve to have. So the schools make sure their students in rural parts of the state get their

⁹ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health, Federation University, response to questions on notice, 2 August 2021, p. 2.

¹¹ Colin Axup, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

licences when they are able to, because they can do things—they can travel, they can go to jobs, they can take people places, they can honour appointments.¹²

The Committee notes that the School Bus Program helps to address transport disadvantage among school aged children and their families by providing free transport to school.

The impact of transport disadvantage on young people in rural and regional Victoria

Experiencing transport disadvantage as a young person in rural and regional Victoria can have a ‘scarring’ effect which could harm social development and entrench disadvantage. Youth Affairs Council Victoria said:

Without regular and reliable public transport services, young people in rural and regional Victoria miss out on opportunities that are taken for granted by young people in metropolitan Melbourne and regional cities. Poor public transport reinforces and further entrenches disadvantage leaving rural and regional young people behind their Melbourne-based peers.

Without access to public transport, young people also miss out on a range of important development and social activities including local sport, visiting friends, going to the local park and engaging in volunteer work.¹³

This was echoed by Infrastructure Victoria, which outlined that transport disadvantage limits post-secondary education and work opportunities for young people in rural and regional Victoria:

Higher education participation rates among regional young people are much lower than their urban counterparts, with a participation rate of about 23% compared with 39% in urban areas. Limited transport options and punctuality issues resulting from living far away from potential employers could affect young job candidates success in finding work, impacting regional young people’s ability to access employment. Many regional young people cite owning a car as a determining factor in deciding to undertake post-secondary education, such as TAFE or university, and the share of young people citing this concern increases in smaller or more remote areas.¹⁴

Ms Claire Lock, a young person from Bright, gave evidence to the Committee at a public hearing. She said that her peers worried about accessing education and training opportunities due to a lack of public transport and that use of a private vehicle was their only option:

The access to training and TAFE is also another major worry of my peers. The local TAFE is 80 kilometres away, in Wangaratta, and there is no timely bus service to and from it.

¹² Chris Lowe, Executive Director, Bus Association Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

¹³ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 9.

I have not been able to access specific health or educational events due to this lack of infrastructure, and most of my peers, unless they have their licence, cannot get there.¹⁵

As well as missed education and work opportunities, the Committee heard that young people may miss out on key services. In its submission, Youth Affairs Council Victoria told the Committee that youth workers had reported young people were having trouble travelling to youth services:

Youth workers told YACVic Rural about organising a private bus service, paying for taxis, or requiring support workers to chaperone young people to and from the service. This financial burden on youth services is an inefficient but necessary use of resources which could be alleviated by improving public transport services.¹⁶

According to the submission, up to 80% of the young people in rural and regional Victoria rely on parents to drive them to appointments. Youth Affairs Council Victoria noted that this could be a problem for young people worried about their parents knowing that they are accessing mental health, sexual health or LGBTIQ services.¹⁷ This concern was also expressed by Indigo Shire Council.¹⁸

In a survey conducted by Youth Affairs Council Victoria to help prepare its submission, only 39% of respondents reported catching public transport to access youth services.¹⁹

Ms Lock explained her difficulty accessing medical services in North East Victoria means she relies on her parents to drive her to a larger town to access services. She added that not all of her peers can rely on their family for transport.²⁰

How increased access to the School Bus Program would assist young people

In its submission, Youth Affairs Council Victoria believed that additional transport options would lead to better outcomes for young people in rural and regional Victoria, including improved:

- health
- mental wellbeing, including addressing loneliness and isolation
- participation in the workforce and education.²¹

¹⁵ Claire Lock, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Indigo Shire Council, *Submission 67*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 15.

²⁰ Claire Lock, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

²¹ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 17.

In relation to work, Youth Affairs Council Victoria said that school buses could be used to help young people take up more employment opportunities:

One in three young people we spoke with said that improved public transport would allow them to start a new job or work more hours. In the context of high youth unemployment and underemployment exacerbated by COVID-19, and mismatches with job vacancies, the opportunity to support a third of unemployed and underemployed young people into work is unmissable. School buses could enable young people to be better connected with work opportunities in both regional and metropolitan employment centres. This will give young people the chance to explore meaningful local employment opportunities²²

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare also argued that school buses could open employment opportunities for young people. It stated ‘by making school buses available for young people accessing employment in their closest town, this would ensure that there is a choice of bus service and more frequent buses.’²³

The Victorian Council of Social Service advocated using the School Bus Program for similar reasons, including accessing after school care programs. In its submission, it argued:

Young people who are early school leavers and undertaking further education and training (such as at TAFE or through an apprenticeship) are particularly vulnerable to transport disadvantage. Better transport options would provide them with opportunities for more or different work, and to connect with their communities. For those young people attending school, there could be benefit in extending the School Bus Program to enable travel between schools to attend an outside school hours care program where their school does not offer a program, or other sporting or recreational activities.²⁴

In its submission, Wellington Shire Council said that increasing transport options for young people accessing higher education may encourage them to stay in rural and regional Victoria after finishing school.²⁵

The Committee notes that many young people in rural and regional Victoria are experiencing transport disadvantage. A lack of public transport, and barriers to getting a licence and owning a private vehicle, can deprive young people of important education, work and social opportunities and deny access to essential services. Stakeholders told the Committee that expanding the School Bus Program would go some way to alleviating these issues. This is discussed further in Chapter 3.

22 Ibid.

23 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 144*, p. 5.

24 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, pp. 11-12.

25 Wellington Shire Council, *Submission 91*, p. 5.

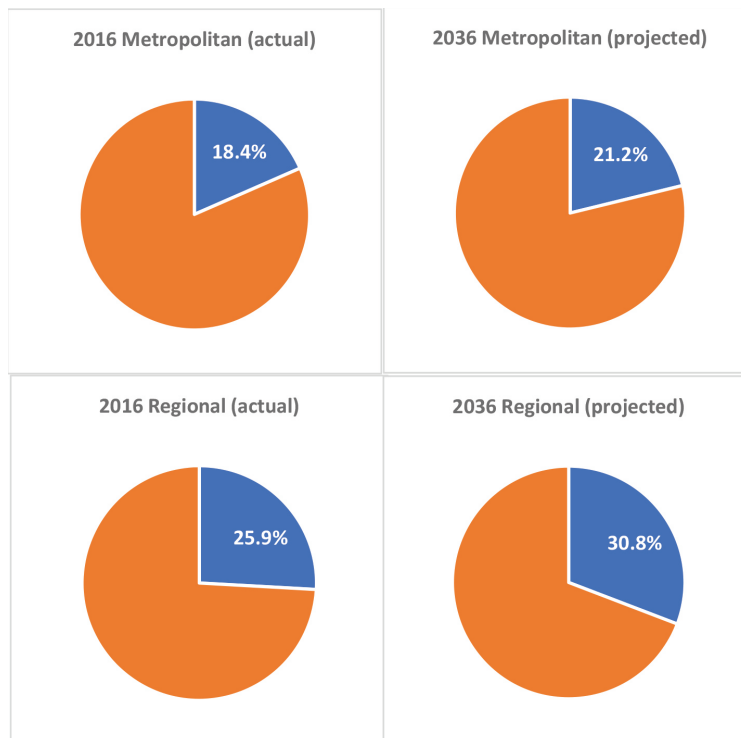
FINDING 1: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst young people in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- post-secondary education
- employment
- essential services, including youth services.

2.3.2 Seniors

Older Victorians are a growing cohort in rural and regional Victoria. The Commissioner for Senior Victorians provided the Committee with data that showed the proportion of those over 60 in rural and regional Victoria is larger in comparison to Metropolitan Melbourne. In 2016, 25.9% of the population in rural and regional Victoria was over the age of 60, while in Metropolitan Melbourne it was 18.4%. By 2036, it is predicted that these figures will have grown to 30.8% of people over the age of 60 in rural and regional Victoria and 21.2% in Metropolitan Melbourne.²⁶ Figure 2.3 below illustrates these figures.

Figure 2.3 Victorian metropolitan and regional population 60 years of age or older, 2016 actual and projected for 2036



Source: Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, p.5.

²⁶ Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, p. 5.

Mobility is a key component of healthy ageing. Accessing social opportunities and essential services such as medical appointments and shopping helps to keep seniors connected to their community. As with young people, seniors in rural and regional Victoria experience transport disadvantage due to limited public transport, increasing their reliance on private vehicles. Cessation of driving due to reduced physical function and the cost of maintaining a private vehicle are large contributors to transport disadvantage among older Victorians.

Transport is highly valued by seniors. In its submission, the Commissioner for Senior Victorians provided results of a survey of 4,762 individuals undertaken as part of the Commissioner's report into *Ageing well in a changing world*. The survey found that personal mobility was the second most important factor in independent ageing, after secure housing.²⁷

The Commissioner also noted that among older people, those most at risk of transport disadvantage are:

- people on low incomes
- people with disabilities
- older women
- people living with dementia or chronic health conditions.²⁸

In its submission, the Council on the Ageing provided evidence on the difficulty older people have using public transport in rural and regional Victoria. This includes few accessible services and having to walk long distances.²⁹ However, much of the submission addressed issues related to private vehicles. Infrastructure Victoria also stated that 'there is a strong driving culture among older Victorians'.³⁰

The two key issues relating to private vehicles that contribute to transport disadvantage among older Victorians in rural and regional Victoria are:

- a reduction in physical function, leading to a decrease in, or cessation, of driving³¹
- the costs associated with private vehicle ownership.³²

Infrastructure Victoria explained that age-related conditions that could lead to older people no longer driving include:

reduced reaction time, increased frailty, chronic illness (and use of associated medications), and declining cognitive and sensory functioning can lead to driving cessation, affecting their mobility.³³

²⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

²⁹ Council on the Ageing, *Submission 139*, p. 4.

³⁰ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 9.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, p. 6.

³³ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 9.

Regarding the cost of transport for seniors on a fixed income, the Commissioner for Senior Victorians reported:

Managing the cost of living on a fixed income can mean that little is left for transport costs. This may limit the capacity to travel into town and to other nearby areas. The Multipurpose Taxi Program does provide subsidies for eligible seniors but even with this support, transport costs may not be affordable.³⁴

The Commissioner for Senior Victorians identified a strong link between reduced mobility and social disengagement:

When the time comes to think about whether it is safe for them to continue to drive, loss of a driver's licence due to medical issues or reduced functionality can be a game-changer for older people and those who may rely on them as 'designated drivers'. It often results in significantly reduced mobility particularly in areas with limited or no public transport. In rural and regional areas this difficulty may be further exacerbated by lack of access to other options such as commercial passenger vehicles or volunteer driver services.

Lack of appropriate and affordable alternatives to self-driving transport at these times carries the risk of disengagement from usual activities, especially if services and social participation opportunities for seniors are distant.³⁵

The impact of transport disadvantage on seniors in rural and regional Victoria

A lack of transport options can result in social disengagement, potentially leading to a deterioration in both physical and mental health among seniors.

In its submission, Infrastructure Victoria stated:

Mobility is essential to the emotional wellbeing of older people as it enables social connection, a key factor in their psychological health. Mobility is also an important determinant of good physical health for older people as it enables access to healthcare, services, and programs for maintaining good health. A lack of mobility is detrimental to the physical and psychological wellbeing of older people as it hinders their accessibility to such services and prevents social connection. Isolation and loneliness, role loss, depression, and cognitive ill health are often the consequences of poor mobility.³⁶

The Commissioner for Senior Victorians informed the Committee that social isolation was a health risk on a par with other risks:

Isolation and loneliness have impacts at both the individual and the societal level. International research has consistently identified that the experience of loneliness for an older person is a significant risk factor for morbidity and mortality, comparable to other high risk factors such as smoking, alcohol consumption and obesity.

³⁴ Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, p. 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁶ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 9.

The health impacts of loneliness include ill health and risk-taking health behaviour such as an unhealthy diet, heavy alcohol consumption and physical inactivity, high blood pressure, poorer quality and quantity of sleep, mental health and wellbeing issues such as anger, depression, worthlessness, resentment, pessimism and suicidal thoughts, increased rates of cognitive decline and increased risk of heart disease and stroke.³⁷

The Committee also heard that transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria is preventing seniors from accessing key services such as medical appointments. The Council on the Ageing explained that transport to medical appointments is a major concern for older Victorians:

Older people generally access health care services at higher rates than younger people. As such, medical appointments make up a high proportion of older people's transport journeys. Transport to medical appointments is a major concern for older people living in rural and remote Victoria.³⁸

How increased access to the School Bus Program would assist seniors

Removing barriers to accessing the School Bus Program could help address transport disadvantage among older Victorians by providing additional transport options in areas where there is little or no public transport.

The Council on the Ageing noted that the use of school buses could lead to improved access to key services and social interaction among senior Victorians in rural and regional Victoria. It said:

Better utilisation of school buses in rural and remote Victoria could help alleviate transport disadvantage by facilitating improved access to medical services, shopping precincts and train stations and social activities within school hours and on weekends.³⁹

A letter of support from the Phillip Island Seniors Club stated that using school buses as community transport would:

mean they are able to keep their independence for a more prolonged period of life. They can meet up with friends and family downtown. They can visit medical services on the island with greater access, as having to wait for a taxi can be sometimes too long a wait, and not everyone is eligible for a half price taxi card. With our elder generation having access to a regular community bus, you are giving them a greater quality of life. No-one ever likes to have to rely on other people to get us around, when we know that with just a small thing like a community bus available at least on an hourly basis every day, Monday to Sunday, would be a huge extension to their independence and quality of life.⁴⁰

³⁷ Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, pp. 7–8.

³⁸ Council on the Ageing, *Submission 139*, p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 12*, p. 4.

The Commissioner for Senior Victorians also argued that having seniors travel on school buses could enhance intergenerational understanding.⁴¹ At a public hearing, the Commissioner expanded on this idea that interaction between children and older people would benefit both groups. He stated:

For those of you, say, that saw the ABC story around aged-care homes for four-year-olds, you would have seen the inspiration and the bounce that came into people's lives. So I think that is how older people would see it: that here is a great opportunity. They would love the ability to interact. For many people that, say, live in a rural community that do not have an enormous amount of opportunity to connect and have social interaction, the fact that they could be on a bus and have a chat [would be a positive outcome].⁴²

Professor Unsworth said that while some old people would find it hard to use school buses with no mobility access, it would still benefit those without accessibility needs:

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 ...⁴³

FINDING 2: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst seniors in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- essential services
- social activities.

2.3.3 People on low incomes

People on low incomes in rural and regional Victoria experience transport disadvantage primarily due to the costs involved with accessing public transport and private vehicle ownership. This can entrench disadvantage in lower socioeconomic areas.

In its submission, Infrastructure Victoria explained that lower income households spend a larger proportion of their income on transport in comparison to high income households:

Low-income households are much more likely to experience transport disadvantage than households with a higher income: 9.9% of households in the lowest income quintile experience difficulty with accessing transport compared with 1.3% in the highest

⁴¹ Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Submission 140*, p. 8.

⁴² Gerard Mansour, Commissioner, Commissioner for Senior Victorians, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁴³ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

quintile. Around one in three regional Victorian households use social security as their primary source of income: their low income constrains the amount they can spend on transport.⁴⁴

The impact of transport disadvantage on people with low incomes in rural and regional Victoria

Infrastructure Victoria explained how transport disadvantage affects low income households access to health and education services:

Transport disadvantage for low income households significantly affects access to services and education. Around 35% of residents receiving government support for housing are unable to access an Elective Surgery Information System (ESIS) hospital or regional centre by public transport. Around 50% can only access a single TAFE by public transport with TAFEs in each region often specialising in different courses; 25% cannot access a TAFE at all via public transport.⁴⁵

Mallee Family Care gave an example in its submission of the impact of transport disadvantage on mothers in the North-West town of Manangatang:

The situation is particularly dire in Manangatang, as a small, rural community they are facing a decline in population and local services. Residents are a mix of local farming families and people on low incomes or benefits attracted to the area due to low housing costs. Situated 80 kilometres west of Swan Hill and 54 kilometres south of Robinvale, Manangatang has no supermarket, no petrol station and no public transport, the closest towns with these amenities are only accessible by car. Mallee Family Care has clients living in Manangatang, soon-to-be mothers who are not undergoing pre-natal checks and toddlers not accessing Ages & Stages checks due to an inability to travel to Swan Hill or Robinvale.⁴⁶

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare provided further examples in its submission:

Another barrier that was identified in Geelong for families who need support from family services, is the cost of 'bus passes' to access a public bus to get to school. This can be prohibitive for some families. But for some families who live in country areas (southwest Victoria for example), there is no access to school buses at all for some young people who live further out. For those who do not attend the closest government school there are no buses available.

In Mildura, there is a large cohort of young people in out-of-home care with a lack in education in obtaining bus passes and timetables. Frequent placement changes mean that these young people require new travel arrangements, and this has an impact on their confidence in utilising public transport.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Mallee Family Care, *Submission 121*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 144*, p. 5.

How increased access to the School Bus Program would assist people on low incomes

Use of the School Bus Program could assist people on low incomes by providing access to employment, education and essential services.

A submitter from Yarram in Gippsland gave an example of the transport difficulties faced by low income families and how the School Bus Program could assist:

We cannot afford housing in Yarram-I am on a disability support pension. House prices have skyrocketed, as we all know. I am still paying off my small house in Woodside. As my son is on the spectrum, he is afraid to get his driver licence. I don't know when, or if he'll be able to do so. He also has type 1 (insulin dependent) Diabetes, which also makes it hard to obtain a driver licence.

So I am writing about using school buses during the day to help my son, myself, my neighbours, and many others who live in or around Yarram, and desperately need transport. People are getting older around Yarram, and we can't all drive forever. Conversely there are many young people in and around Yarram-many of whom can't get work as they can't drive, and there is literally no public transport, in and around Yarram, to even link up with v-line buses. Please let us use school buses, not just for school, because we don't have any public transport.⁴⁸

Mildura Rural City Council said that many of the Council's new arrivals were low income households moving into the area to access affordable housing.⁴⁹ In its submission, it quoted a senior council officer who explained that expanding the School Bus Program would significantly benefit these communities:

With affordable housing in rural areas, such as Ouyen, there has been a change in townships demographics. Unfortunately these outlying towns do not have the community services and assets, including public transport, to best support families and individuals. We then see a compounding problem with some of our most vulnerable community members having the least access to social supports and reduces health and wellbeing outcomes and the cycle of poverty continues. It is these rural communities who have the most to gain.⁵⁰

FINDING 3: Increased access to the School Bus Program could assist transport disadvantage amongst people on low incomes in rural and regional Victoria by providing transport options to travel to:

- post-secondary education
- employment
- essential services.

⁴⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 92*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Mildura Rural City Council, *Submission 131*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

2.4 Transport disadvantaged areas

Transport disadvantage does not just affect certain demographic and socioeconomic groups in rural and regional Victoria, it may also be experienced across a geographic area.

While a lack of public transport is the key driver of transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas, this is exacerbated by geography. Brendan Patterson, a submitter from Euroa, discussed the transport disadvantage they have experienced, noting that there is poor public transport access to work, TAFE and university due to the distances required to travel:

My town of Euroa (3000 people, 150 kms north of Melbourne) has a railway line / station and 4 larger regional centres (Seymour, Shepparton, Benalla and Wangaratta) all within a 45-minute drive: for those lucky enough or well-off enough or just plain old enough to be able to drive.

All 4 regional centres offer access to one / many medical facilities, TAFE, university, RTO learning organisations and employment and entertainment opportunities not available in Euroa. The existing railway tables are so poorly offered / scheduled that they make using them for work / TAFE / university impractical. In effect, if you can't drive, these services may just as well not exist.⁵¹

Another submitter from Euroa, Robyn Neville, told the Committee about the challenge of relying on public transport to reach the nearest doctor:

As I watch the go TAFE school bus come from Shepparton I wish I could use it ... Yet our dr. makes us go to Shepparton for cancer treatment eye tests. X rays. if you do not have a car the trip is, Euroa, Seymour, change trains to Shepparton. Our dr. does not have accreditation for Wangaratta Benalla or Seymour hospital. Euroa hospital is a private hospital/conversant. In 60k+ to the nearest hospital.⁵²

2.4.1 Public transport in rural and regional Victoria

In its submission, Infrastructure Victoria detailed that public transport in rural and regional Victoria 'largely consists of regional and town buses, which mainly service more populous towns and cities, and V/Line passenger rail and coach services.'⁵³ It noted that many of the services are infrequent or limited.

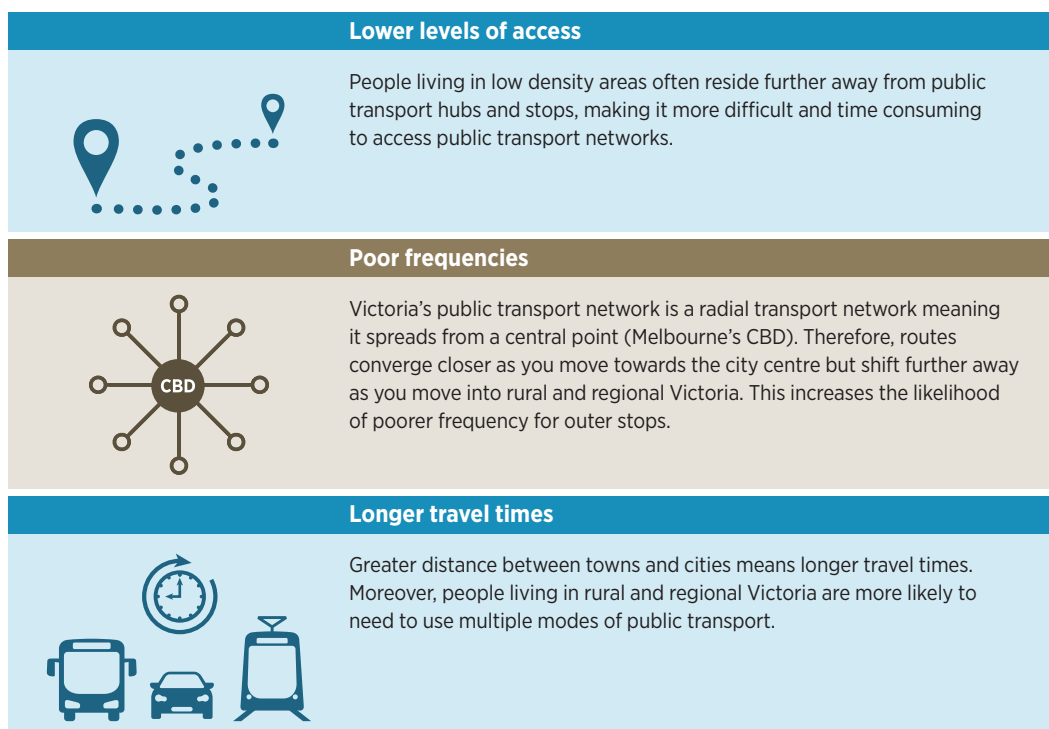
According to Infrastructure Australia, public transport in low density areas, which includes regional areas and some outer suburban areas⁵⁴ is typically characterised by three consumer issues, which are outlined in Figure 2.4 below.

⁵¹ Brendan Patterson, *Submission 52*, p. 1.

⁵² Robyn Neville, *Submission 53*, p. 1.

⁵³ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Infrastructure Australia defined 'outer suburbs' as suburbs or regions which are located more than 20km away from a capital city centre or take over 60 minutes to travel to from a capital city.

Figure 2.4 Transport consumer issues in regional and outer suburban areas

Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Infrastructure Australia, *Outer Urban Public Transport: Improving accessibility in low-density areas*, Commonwealth Government, 2018, p. 20.

These issues mean that people living in outer suburban and regional areas are 'more reliant on cars, are more likely to own more than one car, and travel longer distances.'⁵⁵ A greater reliance on private vehicles can be a significant financial burden on some families.

Public transport in rural and regional Victoria is much less used in comparison to private vehicles. Infrastructure Victoria told the Committee that as at 31 January 2019:

- 13,924 people reported using public transport to get to work
- 416,367 drove to work
- 28,609 reached work as a passenger in a car.⁵⁶

Mr Chris Lowe from Bus Association Victoria said that while public transport in larger regional centres is well established, it becomes less frequent in more remote parts of the State:

In regional Victoria, such as Bendigo, Ballarat, the Latrobe Valley, Geelong, Shepparton, Horsham and major and secondary regional centres, there are public transport networks. There are bus networks that have been operating for many years so if you do not have a

⁵⁵ Infrastructure Australia, *Outer Urban Public Transport: Improving accessibility in low-density areas*, Australian Government, 2018, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 8.

car or you cannot drive or will not drive there is a safety net public transport network in place for you to be able to socialise and contribute to the economy ...

... In rural Victoria the public transport network is hit and miss. If you take a town like Wycheproof, Sea Lake or Manangatang, for example, you will be lucky if the V/Line coach comes through two or three times a week. If you miss that and you do not have a car, you are very limited—and I am not having a go at public transport.⁵⁷

Mallee Family Care described the lack of public transport in remote parts of the North-West of Victoria, which is likely to be characteristic of other remote areas of the State. It said:

Public transport consists of local bus services, school bus services and taxis, all of which become less frequent, comprehensive and accessible the further you move from main townships.

Kerang has limited access to Echuca via a government funded bus running on the first Tuesday and third Friday of each month. Birchip residents without a private vehicle are reliant on community transport to access medical appointments while the communities of Robinvale and Manangatang have no public transport options.⁵⁸

A number of stakeholders told the Committee that public transport in rural and regional Victoria should receive additional funding, rather than adapting the School Bus Program to meet public transport needs. For example, a submitter said: ‘Put on proper public transport if there is a demand for it in rural areas instead of using SCHOOL buses!!! [original emphasis]’⁵⁹

However, Infrastructure Victoria explained why it is difficult to provide public transport in rural and regional areas in comparison to metropolitan areas:

Low population density, larger distances, and disparate travel patterns in much of regional Victoria mean regional towns are unsuited to traditional metropolitan public transport approaches, leaving few – if any – alternative transport options. The diversity of Victoria’s regions means there are different challenges to accessing transport in each region, sub-region, town, or rural area. For instance, public transport in more populous areas experiences significant demand putting pressure on services. Conversely, in rural or less densely populated areas public transport is infrequent, unreliable or simply non-existent.⁶⁰

This makes traditional public transport that adheres to set routes and timetables more expensive per capita than in metropolitan areas. As noted in Chapter 1, Infrastructure Victoria’s report, *Victoria’s infrastructure strategy 2021-2051*, noted that regional Victoria takes up 25% of public transport spending to deliver 6% of trips.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Mallee Family Care, *Submission 121*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Jodi Schmedje, *Submission 35*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Infrastructure Victoria, *Submission 132*, p. 8.

⁶¹ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria’s infrastructure strategy 2021-2051: Volume 1*, Infrastructure Victoria, Melbourne, 2021, p. 230.

Using the School Bus Program to tackle transport disadvantage is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

FINDING 4: Public transport in rural and regional Victoria requires more funding per capita compared to metropolitan areas due to greater geographic distance between population centres and lower population density.

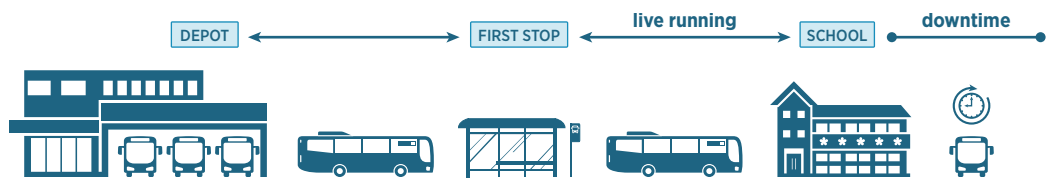
2.5 The potential of the School Bus Program to improve public transport in rural and regional Victoria

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Committee was informed of two main ways the general public might be able to use the School Bus Program more:

- for trips during school journeys (known as live runs)
- for trips outside of school journeys, including during the day, while children are at school, as well as school holidays and weekends (known as downtime).⁶²

Figure 2.5 below describes live runs and downtime.

Figure 2.5 Live runs and downtime



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, adapted from Correspondence sent by the Department of Transport to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, received 28 September 2021, p.6.

Much of the evidence received by the Committee was in relation to general public access to the School Bus Program during live runs. Section 3.3 examines child safety if more of the public used school buses during live runs. Sections 3.2 and 3.4 examines other issues involved with allowing greater public access on live runs, including whether the School Bus Program should have its routes altered, capacity issues and the potential administrative burden on schools. Section 3.5 examines the barriers the general public face when booking seats on live runs.

Section 3.6 examines the use of school buses by the general public during downtime. This includes addressing issues regarding Commonwealth disability legislation and school buses. It also addresses how the routes might be chosen if more of the general public used school buses during downtime.

One of the central questions in this Inquiry is whether facilitating greater public access to the School Bus Program could improve public transport in rural and regional Victoria.

⁶² Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 6.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Committee has determined that school bus routes on live runs should not be changed to suit the transport needs of the general public. This is because route alterations to serve employment or post-secondary education precincts would result in longer journeys, disadvantaging school students. The Committee does not believe that school students should have a poorer service to meet the public transport needs of other groups. This issue is discussed in detail in Section 3.4.

Without any route or timetable changes to school bus routes, the public transport value of the School Bus Program is limited. This was put forward by Mr Graeme Sandlant, a school bus operator, who said that School Bus Program services do not have optimal timetables for the general public:

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.⁶³

In addition, as noted in Chapter 3, school buses are prevented from operating public transport trips during downtime unless they are accessible to people with a disability. As only 2%⁶⁴ of school buses in Victoria are compliant with Commonwealth disability legislation, this significantly limits the number of buses that could be put to public transport use during the school day.

The Committee considers that without changes to school bus routes on live runs to suit the general public or the ability to operate services for the public during downtime, the School Bus Program will only be able to provide limited public transport utility.

This was discussed by the Victorian Council of Social Service which said that use of the School Bus Program by the public would not be a quick fix for transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. It stated:

Current provisions that enable access to school buses on the school route for the general public have not solved transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas. While communication strategies may increase the uptake of existing pathways, school buses will not be the quick fix to giving rural and regional Victorians access to a wide range of services and opportunities.⁶⁵

The Committee believes that the recommendations contained in this Report to facilitate public access to the School Bus Program could result in some minor benefits to transport options for rural and regional Victorians.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the Committee does not recommend that there should be changes to school bus routes to suit the transport needs of the general public because it would disadvantage students.

⁶³ Graeme Sandlant, Sandlant Bus, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 14.

The Committee heard that instead, improving public transport services would offer more scope to address transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. Mr Sebastian Antoine, Research and Policy Officer at Youth Affairs Council Victoria told the Committee:

Young people said and youth workers said that improving public transport would give rural and regional young people the same opportunities that their metro peers take for granted—level the playing fields, connecting them with the opportunities there.⁶⁶

As discussed above, providing public transport in rural and regional Victoria is difficult due to lower population density and greater physical distance between population centres.

However, the Committee heard that the recent release of *Victoria's Bus Plan* will see improved public transport services in regional Victoria. The plan sets out how bus network reform, investment and innovation will be delivered in the coming years. Mr Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services at the Department of Transport, gave an overview of the bus plan:

So the five key reforms there in the bus plan are: make the network simpler, faster and more reliable; introduce a cleaner, smarter fleet, the right buses for the right routes—and we can get into a little bit of that later, particularly in relation to accessibility and different types of buses for different jobs; better performing buses— all-door boarding, rapid running, integrated interchanges with the train et cetera is a really important thing; better customer experience; and, lastly, a big area I think for improvement into the future around systems management, data and how we might use technology for growing our bus knowledge and making them more adaptable to different needs within society, underpinned of course by better value for money and being able to partner with the industry.⁶⁷

He added that school special services featured in the bus plan, with additional services being added in outer metropolitan and regional areas:

One of the pillars of that plan is around school routes and having buses to meet demand spikes from students travelling to and from school on routes, and we also in the last budget announced that we are adding some growing services in those growing communities that I mentioned—The Lakes in South Morang, St Helena in Eltham, Officer Secondary College, Elevation college in Craigieburn, Alamanda in Point Cook, Oberon in Armstrong Creek—and also planning for the new combined high school in Shepparton, which is a really, really important part of that network.⁶⁸

While the use of school buses by the general public may not deliver much additional public transport capability in rural and regional Victoria, the Committee welcomes the Victorian Government's investment in Victoria's Bus Plan and hopes that rural

⁶⁶ Sebastian Antoine, Research and Policy Officer, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services, Department of Transport, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 September 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

and regional public transport will continue to receive the focus it deserves to improve economic and social outcomes for transport disadvantaged groups.

FINDING 5: Although the School Bus Program could be modified to offer increased access to the general public, the program is not a suitable solution to transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria.

3 Expanding public access on Victoria's School Bus Program

3.1 Introduction

This Chapter examines whether policy changes can be made to Victoria's School Bus Program to make it easier for the general public to travel on school buses. The Committee has not recommended wholesale changes to the priority of access for the school bus system. The Committee believes that students should not be disadvantaged by public access on school buses and their safety should be paramount.

However, the Committee identified small changes to the School Bus Program that would facilitate increased access by the general public and, as stated in Chapter 2, play a small role in addressing transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. The Committee was informed of two opportunities for increased public access on Victoria's School Bus Program to assist transport disadvantaged groups in rural and regional Victoria. The first is on school journeys (live runs), the second is during the day when students are at school or on school holidays (downtime). However, each of these options has barriers that prevent greater use by the general public.

When considering access for the general public on live runs, the Committee has identified the following issues that need to be satisfied before barriers to public access can be removed. They are to:

- assess the capacity of school buses
- ensure child safety
- ensure that students and schools are not disadvantaged.

The availability of spare seats on school buses across rural and regional Victoria varies. Some routes have capacity, while others don't. Some of the routes that are thought to be full can also have availability on some days if students are away. The Department of Education and Training is improving its processes to have more up to date information about where there is capacity, so that they can determine where the public can board.

The safety of children on live runs was the key concern of stakeholders to the Inquiry. While the Committee understands these concerns, it did not receive any evidence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adult passengers on a school bus in Victoria. However, it identified a number of measures that could be put in place to ensure child safety where members of the public are present on school buses.

When considering public access on live runs, the Committee also determined that school bus routes should not be altered to suit the general public. This is because

changing routes would make trips longer and disadvantage students. The Committee did not consider it was appropriate to compromise dedicated student transport to seek better public transport outcomes. Current School Bus Program routes are focussed on travel to school rather than employment precincts or population centres. These unchanged routes may offer only limited public transport utility and could struggle to attract public patronage.

For those members of the public who do wish to travel on live runs without route changes, the Committee found that there are improvements that could be made in the application process to use the School Bus Program. This includes removing a requirement for a verbal reference check and rolling out an online booking system faster.

In considering the use of the School Bus Program during downtime, the Committee was informed that Commonwealth disability legislation may be a barrier. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 2002* (Cth), school buses are exempt from requirements for buses that transport the public to be accessible to people with a disability. However, if school buses were to offer public transport during downtime, they would no longer be exempt. The Committee was told that the cost of converting Victoria's school bus fleet so that it was accessible to people with a disability would be considerable and not in proportion to the benefit gained from additional public transport services.

Where school buses are compliant with the Act, there is an opportunity for integrated transport services and on-demand services during downtime. These may assist transport disadvantaged regional Victorians to better connect with work and education.

3.2 Assessing capacity

The Committee heard that one of the problems with facilitating greater public access to the School Bus Program is that there are simply very few seats available for the public.

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education and Training explained that school bus capacity is determined each year by coordinating principals submitting information about students who have been allocated a seat. The capacity figures are provided to the Department of Transport by 30 October each year for the following school year.¹ This is augmented by reviews of school bus networks carried out by the Department of Transport called School Bus Centre Reviews. These reviews check policy compliance and route efficiencies, as well as passenger numbers.²

Some submitters reported that their school buses were full, for example a submitter said:

¹ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 1.

² Ibid.

I strongly oppose extending the use of school bus transport to the general public. My children have used rural school buses for the last 18 years and have always experienced buses at full to overflowing capacity.³

Another said: 'My concern into residents using the school bus is the availability of seats. I know the school buses are very full and I would hate for a student to be denied access.'⁴

The Committee stresses that students must never be denied access to their school bus so that members of the public can board. The order of priority (see Chapter 1) that allows members of the public to board a bus only once student demand is satisfied remains the central tenet of the School Bus Program.

The Department of Transport in correspondence to the Committee explained that typically 10–15% of students who are granted a seat on a school bus do not use the service, resulting in spare capacity:

School coordinators/principals create passenger lists for every bus service, this is compared against known vehicle capacity. The excess is spare capacity. In practice more students nominate for the services than utilise the services (typically this about 10-15%). This is considered in spare capacity estimates.⁵

Other stakeholders said that the level of capacity on School Bus Program buses varies. In its submission, the Country Education Partnership explained that through its consultation it found that some routes were full, while others had spare seats:

The variability and inconsistencies that are evident in existing rural school bus services will make changing every service difficult. In some services there may be opportunity while others with full capacity will not be available.⁶

The Committee also heard that capacity could vary on individual buses throughout the year. Mr Chris Lowe, Executive Director at Bus Association Victoria, Victoria's peak body for the bus industry, said:

it is very elastic every single day. I have got some operators down in Wonthaggi who go over to the island every day, and their buses are chockers; they have got people almost hanging out the windows. But there are some freak days where they have got capacity—kids are sick or they are going off to an appointment or whatever. It is elastic, it goes up and down. But there are definitely some services which are fuller than others, so it is a matter of understanding where there is capacity, and if there is none, well, I am sorry, there is none.⁷

³ Name Withheld, *Submission 98*, p. 1.

⁴ Jenni Candy, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

⁵ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 1.

⁶ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 138*, p. 9.

⁷ Chris Lowe, Executive Director, Bus Association Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

The issue of students who have a seat on a bus, but do not use the bus every day was discussed by Adjunct Professor John Stanley, Bus Industry Confederation Senior Fellow in Sustainable Land Transport at the University of Sydney, who said:

There are a certain number of children who are eligible to travel on the school bus, but at any point in time you might only get 80 or 90 per cent of them doing that, because they have things before school they have got to do or commitments afterwards that require other things to happen. It can be really not much more than an estimate of 'Well, we're going to typically have three or four seats available, so we're prepared to make those available for people', but not anybody can turn up and get on the bus. It is really three or four seats ...⁸

Adjunct Professor Stanley believed that while members of the public could be offered seats on buses where students do not use the service on a particular day, spare capacity would be hard to predict with any certainty:

So I think these things are probably reasonably predictable, but you will have an occasional hiccup. As I say, I think that if you can give four or five people a trip they would not have otherwise had much more often, that is a better thing to do—and be prepared to wear the occasionally hiccup.⁹

In correspondence, the Department of Education and Training told the Committee that this year it began implementing a policy called 'confirmed traveller loadings', whereby information from schools about the actual number of students who use the bus at the beginning of a school year is collected.¹⁰

In addition, as discussed in Chapter 1, the Department has begun to roll out an online system for booking a place on a school bus called the School Bus Management System. This allows the Department to see how many students are enrolled for each route without requesting the information from principals. The School Bus Management System has only been made available to 12 school bus networks so far. The School Bus Management System is discussed in Section 3.5.2.

In addition, the Department of Transport informed the Committee about a new digital tool called RideSpace that measures real time capacity on metropolitan trains and informs passengers via the PTV app. It confirmed that the technology exists to measure real time capacity on buses as well as trains.¹¹

The Committee commends the Victorian Government's efforts to collect more up-to-date information about capacity on school buses. The move away from manual yearly collection of patronage information from schools is a step in the right direction. The Committee expects that the School Bus Management System, once rolled out

⁸ John Stanley, Adjunct Professor, Bus Industry Confederation Senior Fellow in Sustainable Land Transport, University of Sydney public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 4–5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 16 September 2021, p. 1.

¹¹ Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services, Department of Transport, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 September 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

statewide, will assist planners to measure capacity more accurately. The Committee also commends initiatives such as RideSpace which provide real time information on capacity to passengers using an app. The functionality of the School Bus Management System to provide School Bus Program applicants information about capacity is discussed in Section 3.5.2. Providing real time capacity information to passengers via an app is also examined in Section 3.5.2.

3.2.1 Bus sizes

The Committee was informed that when patronage on school bus routes declines, the size of the bus may be downgraded to achieve cost savings. In cases where the patronage declines to very small numbers the route may be discontinued.

Mr Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services at the Department of Transport, described the process for discontinuing a route. He said:

particularly in the case of where we are getting down to very low numbers of patronage in the school environment we will talk to the education department about the access to the other subsidy programs that they have, and potentially that is a better response than running an empty bus for a couple of people.¹²

Associate Professor Janet Stanley, Principal Research Fellow, Urban Social Resilience at the University of Melbourne, argued that when patronage on a bus route declines, the Department of Transport should not switch to a smaller bus. She believed the cost of running a larger bus on poorly patronised routes was minimal and the spare seats could be used by members of the public:

If the number of children on a school bus is diminishing, they will change it to a smaller bus. We would argue: why on earth would you do that? The costs are about the same. Or they might amalgamate some routes, which gives children a much longer ride, which we know is not healthy or good for them. So this sort of behaviour, these sorts of practices, I believe could change and give more people more opportunities if we did not do these.¹³

The Committee agrees that, where appropriate, the Department of Transport should encourage the general public to take up spare seats on routes with declining patronage before the size of the bus is downgraded.

As part of the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project, a series of trials ran between 2006 and 2009¹⁴ to gather evidence on allowing the general public access to the School Bus Program,¹⁵ the Department of Transport advertised spare capacity on school buses and liaised with community service organisations to inform their clients

¹² Ibid., p. 9.

¹³ Janet Stanley, Associate Professor and Principal Research, Fellow-Urban Social Resilience Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, p. 12.

about capacity.¹⁶ This is a model that could be replicated by the Department in other communities with declining school bus patronage.

In addition, the Department of Education and Training provided information to the Committee about its plan to 'convert under-utilised School Bus Program services to public transport services providing greater public transport travel options in areas with highest demand i.e., metro fringe and regional cities (Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo etc.).'¹⁷ This initiative should also be pursued. The Committee does not wish to see the loss or downsizing of transport services in regional areas with already poor public transport.

School buses that are converted to run public transport routes must comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002, which are regulations made under the *Disability Discrimination Act 2002* (Cth). This is further discussed in Section 3.6.2. The Department should keep this in mind when considering routes that would be suitable for public transport services.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government explore options to:

- inform local communities of spare capacity on school buses, before downsizing buses on School Bus Program routes with declining patronage
- convert under-utilised School Bus Program services to public transport routes in areas with high demand, where the school buses comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002.

RATIONALE: It should be determined if capacity on school buses can or cannot be filled by the general public before decisions are made about bus sizes. Similarly, it may be possible to use buses that are compliant with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 for public transport in areas of high demand.

3.2.2 Easier access for post-secondary students and apprentices

As discussed in Chapter 2, young people are a key demographic of transport disadvantaged people in rural and regional Victoria. This includes those in post-secondary education who are unable to obtain a driver's licence or afford their own private vehicle.

Some stakeholders suggested that the School Bus Program should be widened to include young people accessing TAFE or other vocational education, as well as apprentices. For example, Mr David Gittus, a submitter, said:

¹⁶ Bus and Regional Services Division Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, 2010, pp. 13, 17.

¹⁷ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation: Inquiry into the use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria*, supplementary evidence received 17 September 2021, p. 7.

Here is a typical scenario. Billy aged 12 and his brother aged 15 travel to school together in a school bus. Billy then leaves school in Year 10 to take up vocational training in the nearby TAFE college. Billy must now find his own way to college as he is ineligible to travel on the bus. Often in country regions the school bus is the only public transport.¹⁸

Youth Affairs Council Victoria also recommended in its submission that the School Bus Program should be promoted to students leaving school for TAFE, apprenticeships and employment.¹⁹

As discussed in Chapter 1, TAFE and other post-secondary students have access to the School Bus Program but they are given the same priority of access as the general public.

Some stakeholders were supportive of facilitating easier access for young people but noted that school bus routes may not suit apprentices and TAFE students. Mr Kevin Phillips, a Consultant at the Country Education Partnership, a peak body that represents regional schools, said:

Where we can ease the burden on parents who currently take up that slack and have to transport their sometimes pre 18-year-olds to a job in another town and take the day out and then collect them at the end of the day, then anything that could assist that is highly supported. And I think opening up that avenue, if that was possible, would not create an issue. The only dilemma about it is trying to link the individual with where they go with a bus service that services it. But that is not insurmountable, and it should be investigated whether it is possible.²⁰

The Committee acknowledges that school bus routes will not always align with the locations of TAFE and other education or employment precincts. This was highlighted in the submission from Youth Affairs Council Victoria which stated, 'Existing school bus routes do not cater to apprentices, trainees, TAFE students and part-time or casual workers because they are designed solely for school runs.'²¹

However, at a public hearing Mr Sebastian Antoine, Research and Policy Officer from Youth Affairs Council Victoria, told the Committee that an information campaign could assist in encouraging transport disadvantaged young people to use school buses:

we spoke to over 200 young people and youth workers to put this submission together, and I think maybe four or five of them at most knew about the opportunity to catch the school buses as a community member, not as a school student. So we think that is a real barrier, and it might just be an information campaign. I think in the submission we said something along the lines of: 'All students who leave school, whether they leave school early or whether they graduate from year 12, get a bit of information that says, "You're still able to catch the school bus if you'd like and if the routes work and if the timetables

¹⁸ David Gittus, *Submission 17*, p. 1.

¹⁹ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 7.

²⁰ Kevin Phillips, Consultant, Country Education Partnership, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

²¹ Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 12.

work. Here's the approach to doing it". So there are a few issues there that we can address, but obviously more impactful would be delivering those extra routes and extra services.²²

This was also discussed by Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health at Federation University, who said one of the findings of the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project was that it is important to advertise that the service is available.²³

The Committee agrees that the School Bus Program is currently underutilised by young people including TAFE students and apprentices. As noted in Chapter 1, 137 post-secondary school students currently use the School Bus Program. The Committee believes this suggests more of these students could travel on school buses in rural and regional Victoria. The Department of Education and Training should seek to inform school leavers in rural and regional Victoria that the School Bus Program is available to them once they leave school.

FINDING 6: The School Bus Program is underutilised by post-secondary students and young apprentices. The Department of Education and Training could address this by increasing the promotion of the School Bus Program to inform young people in rural and regional Victoria of their options.

3.3 Ensuring child safety

The safety of children on school buses where the general public are present was the largest concern expressed to the Committee throughout this Inquiry.

The Committee acknowledges these fears. However, it was informed that there were no examples of child sexual assault on school buses in Victoria perpetrated by adult passengers and that bullying between students was more prevalent.²⁴

This does not mean that child safety is not a concern. The Committee analysed strategies to mitigate against these risks, including designated seating areas for adults, CCTV, and adult supervisors. The involvement of parents, school communities and young people in developing child safety measures will be important to provide assurance if general public patronage on school buses is increased.

²² Sebastian Antoine, Research and Policy Officer, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

²³ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

²⁴ Dr Janet Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2–3.

3.3.1 Child safety concerns and the incidence of child sexual abuse on school buses

A significant number of parents and community members expressed concern that having more of the general public on the School Bus Program would endanger child safety and put them at risk of sexual abuse.

While school children in metropolitan areas routinely use public transport with adults, stakeholders argued that students on the School Bus Program in rural and regional Victoria were at greater risk of sexual abuse from adults because:

- there were less people on school buses and passengers were together for longer periods, allowing opportunity for grooming²⁵
- school buses often dropped children off at their home address allowing potential abusers to get personal information about children²⁶
- the age profile of children on school buses is younger than that of metropolitan buses, with most students on rural and regional buses of primary school age.²⁷

These concerns were raised by Mr Calum Johnston, a submitter whose children use the School Bus Program. He said:

Remember, school buses frequently collect students from their driveway but also remote and unsecure roadsides away from any safety monitoring and frequently even without phone reception. Further, regional school children may spend an hour or more on the school bus each way, then be left in an isolated and unsupervised location ...²⁸

Mr Phillips from the Country Education Partnership, described the child safety fears parents expressed to him and the distinct threat that arises on buses in regional areas compared to metropolitan areas:

they were concerned by the concept of much smaller groups and the potential for relationships to build because the interactions were much more personalised. Therefore things like known drop-off points and how far they were from farm gates or how far they were from homes were the issues that were of concern for the people in, I guess, being anti that comparison, if you like. So they had considered it, and I think they took the position that there was more opportunity for things like grooming, more opportunity for things like personalised interaction, than you experience in the metropolitan areas. There were less adults then in the environment to protect them. On a train there are many adults, and if one steps out of line there is the opportunity for others to step in. On a school bus that does not exist.²⁹

²⁵ Kevin Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

²⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 33*, p. 1.

²⁷ Tony Bates, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 17 September 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

²⁸ Calum Johnston, *Submission 56*, p. 1.

²⁹ Kevin Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

This was also raised in the submission by the Victorian Principals Association which noted that children in Foundation to Year 2 were still developing their awareness of safe behaviours:

Students using school bus services are aged between 4 and 18 years old. They are children. The Economy and Infrastructure Committee must ensure any extension to school bus services complies with the Child Safe Standards. This is particularly relevant for very young students in Foundation to Year 2 who are developing their awareness of safe behaviours. The risk of child abuse should not be increased.³⁰

Parents' concerns about increasing public access to school buses was such that Mallee Family Care, a social services organisation, suggested that parents may withdraw their children from the School Bus Program. This could result in routes being discontinued and leave parents with no option but to give up work hours to transport their children to school.³¹

A submitter shared this sentiment, informing the Committee that they would remove their children from their school bus at the expense of their employment if the general public were allowed on buses:

There are children as young as 5 years old travelling alone on the bus and it is just not appropriate for other adults to have access to them. If other adults were allowed on the bus I would not allow my children to travel on the bus which would not only cost my family and the environment more in diesel costs but I would also have to reduce my working hours in order to pick them up. Other families may not have the option to elect not to use the school bus which would place their children in too vulnerable a position.³²

It is important to repeat the general public can already access the School Bus Program.

The incidence of child sexual abuse on school buses

The Committee acknowledges the legitimate concerns of parents and community members about facilitating easier access to school buses for the general public. The Committee believes the School Bus Program should retain its core function of transporting children safely to school and their welfare should not be compromised to meet the transport needs of other groups.

The Victorian Government requires adults who come into contact with children in an institutional setting to have a Working with Children Check in recognition of concerns about child safety, including sexual abuse.³³ However, in relation to the school bus setting, key witnesses including government departments and academics could not provide an example of child sexual abuse on a school bus perpetrated by an adult passenger in Victoria.

³⁰ Victorian Principals Association, *Submission 70*, p. 4.

³¹ Mallee Family Care, *Submission 121*, p. 7.

³² Karen Humphris, *Submission 23*, p. 1.

³³ State of Victoria, *Working with Children check: Do I need a check?*, 4 May 2021, <<https://www.workingwithchildren.vic.gov.au/do-i-need-a-check>> accessed 6 October 2021.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare told the Committee that the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* identified incidents on a school bus for children with a disability. Georgette Antonas, Manager, Policy at the Centre said:

There was a report looking at the experiences of children with a disability using transport or school buses, and there were some cases that were before the royal commission actually in relation to school buses rather than public transport. There was a disability school with a school bus, and there were some significant incidents that happened in relation to that case. As far as I am aware, public transport is not a high-risk environment in terms of child safety.³⁴

The Committee notes that evidence was presented to the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* that gave examples of bus drivers sexually abusing passengers, including on a school bus for children with a disability.³⁵

Associate Professor Janet Stanley told the Committee that she had conducted a review of international academic literature and could not find an example of sexual abuse occurring on a school bus, but aside from incidents with bus drivers:

If you look at who perpetrates child abuse and where it occurs, I have done a search of the international literature and I could not find any incidence of it occurring on a school bus. Where it actually occurs is in parks, in streets, actually in the school and in homes. It is most unlikely to occur on a school bus, but of course you cannot say definitely it will not. A bigger problem where a couple of incidents have occurred, unfortunately, is the school driver. I could only find two news media reports on that. And actually there have been a couple of incidents internationally at the school bus stop, so where there is not adult intervention there.³⁶

The Committee asked Barbara Wise, Executive Director, Transport Partnerships Regional and Outer Metropolitan at Transport for New South Wales, about child sexual abuse on school buses in New South Wales. She said that she was not aware of any reported child sexual abuse on a school bus.³⁷ However, she said that there was one incident where a member of the public with mental health issues was denied service because they made children feel uncomfortable:

I did speak to a longstanding employee who had been with Transport for about 30 years, and she said, 'About 20 years ago we had one person, and it was someone with mental health issues. They didn't attack the children, but they were just saying things that made kids feel uncomfortable, and in the end we just stopped providing that person service'. There are facilities in the regulations that permit drivers to refuse entry

³⁴ Georgette Antonas, Manager, Policy, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

³⁵ The Royal Commission also found incidence of sexual abuse that were perpetrated by students against other students, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final report: Volume 13, Schools*, Commonwealth of Australia, Sydney, 2017, p. 116.

³⁶ Dr Janet Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ Barbara Wise, Executive Director, Transport Partnerships, Regional and Outer Metropolitan, Transport for NSW, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

to people who they think are going to cause a disruption or a safety concern for people, so we had a mechanism for dealing with it. It did not come around very often.³⁸

In addition, the Committee was told that it was likely that members of the public applying to use the school bus in rural and regional communities would already be known to the school. Mr Lowe from Bus Association Victoria said:

Most of these school buses, the 1400 school buses in the state, operate in rural parts—not so much regional parts, but they are rural services. They are very small communities, communities where everybody knows everybody. So if the bus operator, the bus driver or a principal of the school—or a designate of the principal—does not know that person who wants to get on the school bus, I would be very surprised. And if none of them do know the person—they might be a recluse or whatever—it will only be one or two degrees of separation to find someone who does know them who might be able to vouch for their candidature to get on the school bus.³⁹

FINDING 7: The evidence presented to the Committee indicates that the incidence of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adult passengers against children on school buses is either non-existent or extremely rare in Victoria. This is also true of other jurisdictions the Committee was informed about which have a higher number of adult passengers, such as New South Wales and Queensland.

3.3.2 Public intervention and bullying

Some stakeholders suggested that having more members of the general public on school buses could deter child sexual abuse, as they would be likely to intervene if they witnessed any problems.

Associate Professor Janet Stanley added that the public could assist to identify potential offenders at an early stage:

But where you put an adult on a bus with the children, there is a lot that can be done to observe what is happening with the kids. There is an instinct if people see that a child is being victimised—most adults will step in and try and stop that. There is a lot that can be done about informing people about grooming, which might be the problem on the school bus, if there is any, where you might regularly see someone that is not particularly known or is identified as a problem in the community sitting next to a particular child. If you know what to do there, you can kick that person off the bus, separate them from the child. So there are many things that can be done to alleviate the possibility of it occurring, but the possibility is very slim.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Dr Janet Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

In addition, the Committee heard that the presence of the public would discourage what some stakeholders argued was a larger threat to child welfare on school buses; bullying between students.

Associate Professor Janet Stanley added that 'that there are about two incidents of bullying every 25-minute ride on a school bus ...'⁴¹ She argued that, as with potential sexual abuse, the presence of adults on the bus would discourage bullying and adults may intervene to stop bullying in some cases.⁴²

Mr Lowe from Bus Association Victoria agreed that bullying was a more prevalent issue than the possibility of child sexual abuse and believed that the presence of the general public may deter bullying behaviour:

People talk about 'Oh, what if a paedophile gets on the bus' and all this sort of nonsense. That is all just rubbish, absolute rubbish. The biggest social issue that we have on school buses is bullying. Now, if you have got an adult on the bus, that is going to reduce, and a nine-year-old is going to be far less inclined to bully another nine-year-old if there is an adult right by, because the adult, if they are a responsible citizen, is going to intervene and say, 'Oi, none of that'. The driver is going to appreciate that, because the driver cannot attend to the needs of all the children on the bus, because he is driving the bus. So adults on a school bus is a good thing. We want it to reduce bullying. That is the number one issue that touches our association all the time.⁴³

However, Mr Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, warned that the general public may not be equipped to deal with challenging behaviour from students and that trained supervisors may be more appropriate to deal with such issues.⁴⁴

Adult volunteer supervisors on school buses is discussed in Section 3.3.3.

FINDING 8: The evidence provided to the Committee suggests that bullying between students using the current School Bus Program is a prevalent threat to child welfare.

3.3.3 Measures to enhance child safety on the School Bus Program

The School Bus Program has a number of child safety requirements that the public must comply with, such as the requirement for a Working with Children Check and approval by the coordinating principal before a passenger may travel. As noted in Section 3.3.4, these child safety requirements are in line with measures on school premises in Victoria.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Colin Axup, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

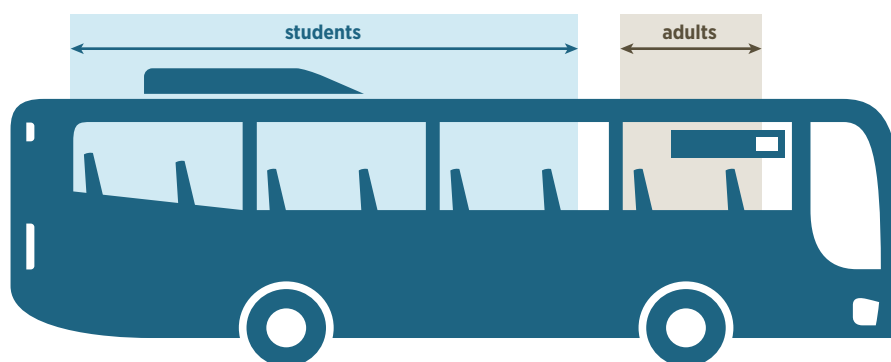
However, the level of concern expressed by stakeholders about increased use by the public of the School Bus Program has prompted the Committee to investigate additional safety measures. These include:

- designated seating areas for adults
- CCTV
- adult supervisors
- GPS technology.

Designated seating areas for adults

Separate seating areas on school buses for members of the public could prevent contact between adults and children. This would be a low-cost measure that could be implemented easily and quickly. An example of a school bus with designated seating for adult passengers is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 An example of a school bus with designated seating for adult passengers



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

The idea was discussed by Adjunct Professor John Stanley, who said:

For example, most of the seats on the school bus are going to be taken up by schoolchildren, and if you are freeing up available school bus seats you could say it is the first two seats in the bus and so the other people sit there and the children sit behind.⁴⁵

Ms Wise from Transport for New South Wales said that school bus operators in New South Wales are required to have child safety risk management measures in place, and one of these measures is to sit the general public at the front of the bus, or to sit very young children at the front.⁴⁶

Mr Lowe agreed that designated seats for members of the public would be a good idea.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ John Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

The Committee recognises that designating certain sections of the bus for general public seating may be difficult on routes where a bus is already close to capacity and the passenger numbers can fluctuate from day-to-day. A strict policy of public-only seats could mean that students are unable to board the bus on days where there are more students than usual. A flexible arrangement would be more suitable where bus operators on individual networks are empowered to direct the general public to sit at the front of the bus where there is capacity and student access to the bus would not be impacted.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Victorian Government direct individual school bus networks to allocate seating for the general public at the front of the bus where capacity allows. This policy should only be pursued where it does not impact student access to the bus.

RATIONALE: Sitting the general public in the front of a bus provides assurances to parents about child safety.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

The installation of CCTV cameras on school buses was suggested as a safety measure for deterring child sexual abuse and as an evidence gathering tool if such offences were to occur.

Mr Lowe advocated for the installation of CCTV on school buses because it would provide a degree of comfort for parents:

And we also think that a camera or cameras should be installed on the school bus as well if the general public is going to get on the school bus. At present school buses do not have those. Keep in mind that we think that way because all the route buses in the state, whether they be in metropolitan Melbourne or regional centres, have cameras, and it just provides a bigger degree of comfort and safety for those parents and families who have got people on the bus.⁴⁸

Ms Wise told the Committee that in New South Wales it is a requirement for larger school buses to be equipped with CCTV when they are purchased by bus operators.⁴⁹ In response to a question on notice, Transport for New South Wales said that as of 31 August 2021, 46% of school buses in New South Wales had CCTV installed.⁵⁰

However, Mr Foa from the Department of Transport said that CCTV may not reduce the risk of incidents happening on a bus because it is used in hindsight to provide evidence of a crime, not prevent a crime:

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ Transport for New South Wales, response to questions on notice, 6 September 2021, p. 2.

In terms of would CCTV in and of itself adjust the risk profile for the bus, I would have to say we have it in trams and trains, but it is a hindsight use. So it allows you to go back and investigate and look in the rear-view mirror; it does not necessarily increase or decrease the risk profile for what is happening for the bus driver in the bus at the time.⁵¹

The Committee acknowledges that CCTV is a tool that provides the most utility following an offence to gather evidence. However, it believes that CCTV can also act as a deterrent. The Committee notes that Transport for New South Wales has a policy for school bus operators to have CCTV installed in larger buses as they are purchased. The Committee believes a similar approach should be taken in Victoria to improve child safety on school buses.

In correspondence with the Committee, the Department advised that ‘the key concern about fitting CCTV is privacy rather than cost. That is, privacy concerns are the key reason that there are no plans to fit school buses with CCTV.’⁵²

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government mandate a requirement for CCTV cameras to be installed on new school buses as they come into operation in the School Bus Program.

RATIONALE: CCTV cameras provide assurances to parents about child safety and can be used to gather evidence of incidents.

Adult supervisors

An adult volunteer or paid supervisor was also proposed as a child safety measure on school buses where there is patronage from the general public. An adult supervisor would supervise interaction between adults and students on the school bus and report concerns.

Mr Lowe told the Committee that adult supervisors on school buses would help soothe concerns about child safety, adding that the role could be filled by parents volunteering their time.⁵³

Mr Axup from the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals said that the adult supervisor role would relieve pressure on the bus driver to supervise students and the role could be volunteer or paid:

The concept of supervision on buses—we would argue that it would need to be a person of purpose who was solely there for supervision. It cannot be the bus driver. Their role is to drive the bus. It could be possible to look for volunteers or to go along that model

⁵¹ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

⁵² Department of Transport, correspondence, 9 November 2021, p. 1.

⁵³ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

of the euphemistic lollipop person that many schools have out the front. That would be that added layer of protection that you would need to look at, but obviously there is a commercial aspect to that, and that is that it would increase cost to the buses.⁵⁴

The suggestion of paid adult supervisors was also considered by Ms Gail McHardy, Executive Officer of Parents Victoria. She said that the education system was already highly reliant on volunteers and that paid adult supervisors could provide employment opportunities in rural and regional Victoria:

I would also add in relation to the volunteers, from Parents Victoria's specific view, we are very mindful of the reliance on parent volunteers. And in fact with all the reviews that have been done around our rural and regional communities, and coming during a pandemic with COVID, we have had a lot of employment impacts. So here is an opportunity, everyone, that a government could turn their mind to around local employment: giving some opportunities to people in those rural and regional areas to take on those responsibilities as a whole community, a holistic approach.⁵⁵

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education and Training said that its Students with Disabilities Transport Program could offer guidance on the costs of installing paid adult supervisors. The program requires vehicles to have a first aid qualified supervisor on every trip. The staff costs for these supervisors is \$30 million per year across the 440 Students with Disabilities Transport Program services. The Department noted the cost would be significantly greater to implement across the School Bus Program.⁵⁶

As was noted in Section 3.3.1 the Committee was not provided with any instances of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adult passengers on school buses in Victoria. Given this, the Committee does not consider it proportionate to recommend that supervisors, either paid or volunteer, be installed on school buses in the event of greater patronage by the general public.

GPS technology

Stakeholders told the Committee that GPS technology could be enabled as a child safety measure on school buses so that parents would be able to see the location of their children's school bus.

Mr Lowe believed that it could ease parent concern if they could see the location of their children's bus, and noted that the technology is available to do so:

We also think that if that sort of regime is introduced it would raise some concerns in the general public about Joe Public getting on a school bus. So in light of that, we think that the school bus should match some of the criteria more closely to your public route bus,

⁵⁴ Colin Axup, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Gail McHardy, Executive Officer Parents Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 16 September 2021, p. 4.

whereby a GPS system is installed on the school bus so parents can track where their child is on their phone. That technology is here and with us now.⁵⁷

Mr Axup, when asked about GPS, commented that most students had a phone which provided a similar service to parents as GPS might:

Well, most young people in this day and age have mobile phones, so by virtue of that they would therefore have access to some form of tracking device, various apps and so forth. You could argue that, you know, the use of those apps could be one of the requirements to access the bus service, which would make at least the individual with that phone, or make the phone, trackable or more trackable than it already is. You know, the GPS of the bus of where it is, that is not dissimilar to, obviously living in the city, the TramTracker app, for example, so you can track the public transport that you are looking for. So it would make sense and obviously the technology exists to enable that.⁵⁸

However, when the Committee asked Mr Phillips from the Country Education Partnership his view on the utility of GPS as a child safety measure, he replied that 'internet provision consistently in some areas does not exist, and would make technology not necessarily a very good solution because of that.'⁵⁹

The lack of internet connectivity in some rural and regional areas was also discussed by Ms McHardy from Parents Victoria. She was asked by the Committee if a QR check-in requirement might be a beneficial child safety measure. She said that a lack of internet coverage in regional areas could hamper technical child safety solutions:

the QR code obviously in theory should work, but unfortunately because we are talking about rural and remote communities there are going to be obviously certain coverage aspects, and I think some other submissions probably on the technological aspects of some of that stuff would be problematic. But certainly in theory it does make sense ...⁶⁰

Overall, the Committee was not persuaded of the utility of GPS as a child safety measure. However, as noted by stakeholders, it is a measure that is important for providing passengers with information about oncoming services. As discussed in Section 3.5.2 the Committee has recommended that the Government investigate the merits of New South Wales' Transport Connected Bus Program, including its ability to give passengers real time information on bus services.

3.3.4 Ensuring input from parents, school communities and young people on child safety measures

The Committee believes that the most important child safety tool to assure parents and school communities is to involve them in the process of devising child safety policies. A stake in the process will help to give parents and school communities ownership of

⁵⁷ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Colin Axup, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Kevin Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Gail McHardy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

their child safety measures and provide peace of mind that the general public can travel safely with children.

Mr Phil Brown, Executive Officer at Country Education Partnership told the Committee that parents of children in country Victoria felt threatened about the general public accessing school buses, and that trust needed to be built amongst regional communities:

I think we have got to build trust, and I think the suggestion of actually growing that broader involvement over a period of time so that trust can be built is something we need to explore.⁶¹

Mr Phillips, also from Country Education Partnership, warned that parents could be protective and that rural and regional communities may be reluctant to accept change to a service they are comfortable with:

They are confident in what they have got now. Anything that changes that is likely to make them uncomfortable, therefore they do not believe that change should be made. I think it is a fairly simple line that runs through—that they are happy with what they have got, they do not want to change. So they will put up arguments for why they do not want it to be changed, and one of those will of course be safety because that is their major concern.⁶²

Mr Foa from the Department of Transport discussed the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project and said that it was successful because there was community buy-in:

Look, I think because of the leadership at a local community level, it went some way to alleviating parents' concerns because it provided a really good sort of risk management approach to parents. But it did require a fair bit of local leadership, and for that to be rolled out at scale there would need to be a larger rollout of the School Bus Management System, for instance.⁶³

The Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project is discussed further in Section 3.8.1. The School Bus Management System is discussed in Section 3.5.2.

The Child Safe Standards

Every organisation working with children in Victoria is required to adhere to the Child Safe Standards. These are made under s 17(1) of the *Child and Wellbeing Safety Act 2005* (Vic).⁶⁴ The Commissioner for Children and Young People is responsible for overseeing the standards.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Phil Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Partnership public hearing, Melbourne, 27 July 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

⁶² Kevin Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

⁶³ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ *Child and Wellbeing Safety Act 2005* (Vic) s 17(1).

⁶⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Complying with the Standards*, <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/being-a-child-safe-organisation/the-child-safe-standards/complying-with-the-standards>> accessed 8 October 2021.

There are seven Child Safe Standards. They are:

- Standard 1: governance and leadership—strong and clear governance arrangements to allow leaders to ensure child safety is a focus within their organisation.
- Standard 2: clear commitment to child safety—documenting how organisations will meet their duty of care and responsibilities.
- Standard 3: code of conduct—establish clear expectations for appropriate behaviour with children.
- Standard 4: human resource practices—develop and implement human resource practices that reduce the risk of child abuse occurring within organisations.
- Standard 5: responding and reporting—all staff and volunteers must understand their role in keeping children safe, including their reporting responsibilities.
- Standard 6: risk management and mitigation—to reduce the likelihood of harm organisations must think about and define the risks.
- Standard 7: empowering children—children have a right to be heard and have their concerns and ideas taken seriously.⁶⁶

The submission from the Victorian Principals Association outlined how the Child Safe Standards apply to schools, in particular that the Minister for Education has issued Ministerial Order 870 to schools outlining that they must comply with the standards. The submission said:

Providing a safe environment for students is a key requirement for schools. The Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic) and Minister for Education 'Ministerial Order 870 — Child Safe Standards — Managing the risk of child abuse in schools' are two critical legal requirements which support schools to provide this safe environment.

In particular, Child Safe Standard 6 (Strategies to identify and reduce or remove risks of child abuse) of the Ministerial Order requires schools to actively identify and manage risks to child safety.⁶⁷

Some stakeholders asked whether the Child Safe Standards apply on school buses.⁶⁸ The Committee understands that school bus operators are responsible for complying with the Child Safe Standards while children are on school buses, including identifying and managing risks to child safety.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Adapted from: Commissioner for Children and Young People, *The Child Safe Standards: The seven Standards and the Child Safe Principles*, <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/being-a-child-safe-organisation/the-child-safe-standards>> accessed 8 October 2021.

⁶⁷ Victorian Principals Association, *Submission 70*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ The Principals of Cobram Secondary College, Cobram and District Specialist School, St. Joseph's Primary School, Katunga South Primary School, Cobram Anglican Grammar School and Cobram Primary School, *Submission 89*, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Child Safe Standards: Who do the Standards apply to?*, <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/being-a-child-safe-organisation/the-child-safe-standards/who-do-the-standards-apply-to>> accessed 8 October 2021.

The Department of Education and Training told the Committee that it works with school bus operators to abide by the Child Safe Standards and that it will be assisting them to implement a new set of Child Safe Standards from 1 July 2022:

The Department of Education and Training abides by these standards and requires transport operators delivering student transport services for the School Bus Program to do the same.

The Department of Education and Training will strengthen its child safety advice to transport operators to align with the new Child Safe Standards that will be introduced from 1 July 2022 (i.e., extra requirements for child safety, guidance, new training etc).⁷⁰

The Committee welcomes the Department of Education and Training's work with school bus operators to align with future Child Safe Standards. The Committee notes guidance from the Commissioner for Children and Young People on 'Standard 2: clear commitment to child safety', which recommends that organisations demonstrate their commitment to child safety by documenting how they will meet their duty of care and responsibilities to children in a Child Safe Policy. The guidance says organisations should involve stakeholders in the formulation of their Child Safe Policy:

It is recommended that organisations involve people in its organisational community in the process of developing its Policy or Statement of Commitment. Bringing these people into the process will add their valuable perspective and help build a child safe culture.⁷¹

The Committee believes that parents and school communities should be involved in the formulation of Child Safe Policies when the new standards are introduced from 1 July 2022. Parents and communities will be able to bring a valuable perspective to the child safe policy and their input will help ease the fears of some parents regarding members of the public travelling on school buses.

The Committee also notes 'Standard 7: empowering children' which supports the right of children to contribute to child safety planning and decision making. This was raised in the submission from Youth Affairs Council Victoria which said that the Child Safe Standards 'ask organisations to meaningfully involve children and young people in conversations and decisions around child safety'.⁷² Youth Affairs Council Victoria recommended to 'Meaningfully involve young people in design, governance, monitoring and evaluation of child safety initiatives in relation to sharing school buses.'⁷³

The Committee believes that young people should also be involved in the formulation of Child Safe Policies for school bus operators. This is important so that they have ownership of safety measures and are empowered to raise concerns or speak up if they feel unsafe.

⁷⁰ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 1.

⁷¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Child Safe Standards: Standard 2: clear commitment to child safety*, <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/being-a-child-safe-organisation/the-child-safe-standards/standard-2-clear-commitment-to-child-safety>> accessed 8 October 2021.

⁷² Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Victorian Government, when helping school bus operators to implement the new Child Safe Standards in 2022, ensure that parents, school communities and young people have input in the formulation of Child Safe Policies. Such policies should be communicated widely to parents, school communities and young people.

RATIONALE: It is good policy to include a wide variety of stakeholders when developing child safety standards. This also gives parents further assurances about the safety of their children on school buses.

3.4 Ensuring that students and schools are not disadvantaged

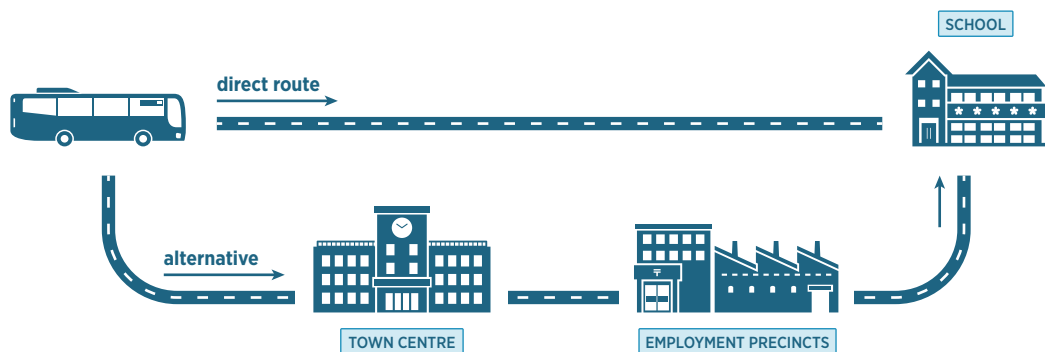
Before consideration of the barriers preventing the general public to access the School Bus Program, the Committee looked at evidence on whether increased general public patronage would compromise student transport. This includes consideration on whether school bus routes should be changed to suit the general public and whether it would cause administrative burdens on schools.

3.4.1 Changing school bus routes to suit the general public

Some stakeholders suggested that additional stops could be added to school bus routes to include employment precincts and population centres. Such measures would augment public transport in areas of rural and regional Victoria with poor services.

Figure 3.2. shows the difference between a direct school bus route and one changed to suit the broader transport needs of the general public.

Figure 3.2 A comparison between a direct school bus route and a route altered to suit the general public



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

However, the Committee heard from parents, schools and other stakeholders who were concerned that substantial changes to the School Bus Program would disadvantage students and undermine its purpose.

The Victorian Principals Association put forward the view that the School Bus Program must continue to prioritise transporting students and should not act as public transport. It stated:

Whilst we are supportive of opening up school buses to support the mobility of the general public (subject to concerns about child safety discussed in the next section of this submission), any opening up cannot reduce or restrict students getting to and from school every day on time. Students utilising the School Bus Program services in effect have reserved places on a school bus (via their school bus coordinator). This guarantees students transport to and from school. This primacy of school students having the first call on school bus services should be retained in any considerations and recommendations from the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.⁷⁴

The joint submission from the Principals of Cobram Secondary College, Cobram Primary School, Cobram and District Specialist School, St. Joseph's Primary School, Katunga South Primary School and Cobram Anglican Grammar School, agreed that the School Bus Program should not act as public transport at the expense of students:

The intent of the School Bus Program was to assist families in rural and regional Victoria by transporting students to school. To make this program a 'public' transport system compromises the safety and wellbeing of students, has significant impacts on the existing infrastructure of the School Bus Program and moves the core purpose of the program from an educational focus to a transport without providing any support for schools whose core business is education.⁷⁵

However, other stakeholders told the Committee that the routes could be amended to suit the general public. Mr Antoine from Youth Affairs Council Victoria recommended minor changes to school bus routes to assist young people to get to work or further education. However, he stressed that this should not be at the expense of the existing School Bus Program:

Our position at YACVic is that the school buses are a valuable resource for students. They are one of the only kinds of services in rural and regional Victoria that are designed specifically for young people, and we do not really want to lose the benefits of that—the fact that it works exactly how young people need it to. So what we would like to see are some minor changes to the existing school bus runs to make it easier for members of the community to get on. So that might include, where feasible, adding a stop at the TAFE or at the train station or at the city centre where workplaces are, which might not add too much time to the school bus run but makes it much more convenient for non-school-age students to catch that bus to and from where they need to go while still keeping the same kind of focus on the service for the school students there.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Victorian Principals Association, *Submission 70*, p. 3.

⁷⁵ The Principals of Cobram Secondary College et al., *Submission 89*, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁶ Sebastian Antoine, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 17–18.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare also advocated for changes to school bus routes to assist children attending kindergarten and young people attending TAFE, noting care should be taken not to disadvantage school students. Ms Georgette Antonas, Manager of Policy at the Centre said:

School buses should be accessible for all children; consider expanding existing bus routes to children attending three- and four-year-old kindergarten and their parents or carers and young people who have left school early and are attending TAFE or who have an apprenticeship; carefully consider the impact of expanding existing school bus routes to the public to make sure that children and young people using the service are not disadvantaged—for example, if travel time is increased as a result of changes.⁷⁷

Mr Lowe from Bus Association Victoria also thought the routes could be amended slightly without adding much cost to the School Bus Program:

I think if the child or the person lives on the existing route, there is no loss or cost or disbenefit to just stopping and picking up that member of the public. If somebody lives close to the route, I still cannot see it being an issue. I honestly do not think an operator could say, 'Hang on, they live 3 kilometres off the route, that is going to mean another 5 minutes in time and therefore that is going to cost the state another \$20 that we are going to need to bill them for'. When it comes down to that sort of marginality, I honestly do not think it will happen because it is marginal; it is just a couple of minutes here, maybe another 1 or 2 or 3 k's there. And because the route has changed they might be able to save a couple of minutes or kilometres off the route once a child moves or a child goes from the bus. So it is swings and roundabouts.⁷⁸

He added that requests to drastically change routes would need more consideration because they may disadvantage students and greatly increase costs.⁷⁹

In considering how students might be disadvantaged if the routes were changed to suit the general public, Ms Kellie Showell, a school bus coordinator in regional Victoria, said that adding stops would lengthen the journey time for children:

If the general public were to use our school buses then would the bus stops change to add additional stops, that would lengthen the bus run and make students travel longer.⁸⁰

Another submitter, Michael Edwards, said that longer journeys would give students less time to prepare for school and result in timetable uncertainty:

With members of the public catching school buses the time school buses take to complete their routes will be longer. School buses arrive at schools in time to give children time to prepare for the day. Adding a random element to this time is a potentially disruptive imposition on students and schools. Similarly with children being dropped off. Many are met by family members at drop off points (eg end of driveways or

⁷⁷ Georgette Antonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁰ Kellie Showell, *Submission 142*, p. 1.

country roads). The parents need to have a firm drop off time to coordinate the picking up of their children.⁸¹

The Committee agrees that altering school bus routes in rural and regional Victoria on live runs to suit the general public would disadvantage students. Adding stops would result in longer journeys that would burden students. The School Bus Program was not designed to be a public transport service and the Committee considers that students should not be disadvantaged because of unmet public transport need.

The Committee acknowledges that unchanged school bus routes may not deliver optimal public transport utility. The routes finish and begin at school gates and may not stop at employment or education activity centres. This issue was raised in the submission by the Tawonga and District Community Association, which said:

School buses terminate at a school, usually in a town or city that may or may not, have services required by the 'vulnerable' (disabled, elderly and low-income persons). If a bus route terminates in a larger town or city where medical specialist services are available, there is a likelihood of a need for subsidised transport. In small rural communities, specialist services do not occur and accessing the school bus will have little or no benefit.⁸²

On balance, the Committee considers the goal of seeking to achieve better transport outcomes for transport disadvantaged groups should not be pursued at the expense of student transport in rural and regional Victoria.

The Committee also considered the possibility of extending school bus routes for the general public after students have been dropped off at school. However, it is not clear whether this would contravene the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (as discussed in Section 3.6.1) because there would no longer be students on the bus. In addition, it is uncertain whether such a policy would be permissible under the current school bus operator contracts, how many extra stops would be needed for each route, and the overall additional cost of extending routes across rural and regional Victoria. The use of school buses during downtime is discussed in Section 3.6.

FINDING 9: Changes to School Bus Program routes and timetables to suit the transport needs of the general public would disadvantage school students and should not be pursued.

3.4.2 The administrative burden on schools

As noted in Chapter 1, schools are responsible for much of the administrative work of the School Bus Program, such as processing applications and keeping details of travellers. On some larger school bus networks, the principal will delegate their school bus responsibilities to a dedicated staff member known as a school bus coordinator.

⁸¹ Michael Edwards, *Submission 31*, p. 1.

⁸² Tawonga and District Community Association, *Submission 128*, p. 2.

On smaller school bus networks, the principal takes on the school bus coordination responsibilities.⁸³

The Committee heard that additional members of the public using the School Bus Program would place more pressure on schools. Ms Showell, a school bus coordinator, said:

Who would do the extra paperwork needed to keep track of who is travelling. What would be the costs of maintaining this system if records are needed to set up a dual system? Tracking in the case of emergencies like Covid would be difficult without full details of those travelling if open to the non-school community.⁸⁴

Mr Tony Bates, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services at the Department of Education and Training explained that in more complex school bus networks, additional staff resources are required to manage aspects of the program and administration can be time consuming:

But when we get to more complex areas, we do fund time release for teachers in schools to help manage the bus network, and that will typically be when a system has six or more buses coming in and the administration does take a bit of time.⁸⁵

The Committee acknowledges the administrative strain on schools that could arise if more members of the public were to use the School Bus Program. The Committee has been informed that the School Bus Management System will be rolled out statewide. This will replace the current paper-based system and with it some of the administrative burden. A presentation given to the Committee by the Department of Education and Training at a public hearing said that school bus networks who have already switched to the School Bus Management System report 'less administrative time spent coordinating buses at schools'.⁸⁶ The School Bus Management System is examined in detail in Section 3.5.2.

3.5 Removing other barriers for the public to access live runs

The Committee was told that the key barrier to the general public using the School Bus Program on live runs is the application process. This includes the use of paper-based forms, the amount of documentation required to apply and an inflexible booking system.

As noted in Chapter 1, only six members of the general public are using the School Bus Program in 2021. This suggests to the Committee that there is an opportunity to increase public use of the School Bus Program where there is capacity.

⁸³ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Kellie Showell, *Submission 142*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, p. 6.

3.5.1 The application process for the general public

Members of the public must complete a four-page form that requires details for a verbal reference check and to provide proof of a Working with Children Check. A copy of the form is included in Appendix B. They must submit this form to the coordinating school of the school bus network they wish to travel on.⁸⁷ The principal makes a decision based on the eligibility criteria, capacity on the bus and the outcome of reference checks.

Associate Professor Janet Stanley told the Committee that she believed the requirements for the public to book a space on the School Bus Program were too onerous and prevented people from applying, telling the Committee 'It is so difficult you really would not approach the matter, I think.'⁸⁸

Mr Lowe from Bus Association Victoria also agreed that the level of vetting for members of the public was too strict:

The crux of our submission says: let us make it simpler for the general public to get on the school bus, let us not make it so arduous, let us just have a simple system in place that says, 'If it's okay with the driver or the operator and it's okay with the school'— either the principal or the principal's delegate— 'that person should be able to get on the bus'. You should not have to go off and get a Working with Children Check and a police check and all the rest of the palaver that the general public are currently required to do.⁸⁹

However, Mr Bates from the Department of Education and Training explained that screening requirements to access the School Bus Program, such as a Working with Children Check, are in line with the policies that are followed for adults who access school grounds in Victoria:

The program is designed to ensure that children in regional and rural areas can safely and fairly access appropriate educational services, but a very major thread and underpinning of all of our policies is child safety, which is why we do tend to have a preference to try and keep the services tightly controlled very much in similar ways to what we have in a school setting. At school settings we require any visitors, any adults coming into schools, to sign in. People that are working with children, including people who are visiting, such as trades staff and others, need to have Working with Children Checks. So we very much in doing our policy settings for the School Bus Program mirror the same settings that we have if students are at school, so a very strong focus on child safety and doing everything we can to protect children.⁹⁰

While the conditions of travel for members of the general public can be considered demanding, Mr Bates said that he believed that the requirement to obtain a Working

⁸⁷ Department of Education and Training, *Form 4: Application for Permission to Travel – General Public*, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/form-4-application-for-permission-to-travel-general-public.docx>> accessed 8 September 2021.

⁸⁸ Dr Janet Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Chris Lowe, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

⁹⁰ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

with Children Check was justified in rural and regional Victoria. This is because students on school buses tended to be a younger cohort than in metropolitan areas. He said:

I think it is partly around the composition of the children on the bus. I will just look at my notes here. So of the 300 bus networks, 141 of them—so it is about 47 per cent— have only got primary aged schoolchildren on them, so grade 6 and down. And I think that is where it is different to, can I say, mainstream public transport—that typically in urban areas on public transport they will be secondary-age students, who, I will just say, are a bit bigger and more robust and can look after themselves. But, you know, we have got about 47 per cent of the services where there are basically no students over the age of about 12 or 13 and we have got a whole lot of, you know, preppies and others like that.⁹¹

Part of a recommendation provided in the submission by Youth Affairs Council Victoria stated that the Victorian Government should 'Consider requiring all passengers above the age of 18 who travel on school buses to have a Working with Children Check in lieu of verbal reference checks to the school principal.'⁹²

The Victorian Council of Social Service also argued for removing the requirement to provide a verbal reference if a person can provide a Working with Children Check:

Consideration should be given to a requirement for anyone over the age of 18, including students or school leavers already eligible to travel on school buses, to gain a Working with Children's check rather than reliance on verbal reference checks.⁹³

The Committee agrees that the requirement for the general public to provide a verbal reference check is too onerous. A Working with Children Check is more proportionate to the child safety risks that may be involved with patronage from the general public. Measures to ensure child safety are addressed in Section 3.3.3.

The Committee believes the requirement for the general public to submit to a verbal reference check should be removed to make the School Bus Program's application process less onerous.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Victorian Government streamline the application process for the general public to use the School Bus Program, looking in particular at whether both a Working with Children Check and a verbal reference are required.

RATIONALE: The current application process is a barrier to the general public accessing the School Bus Program. It is unlikely that both a Working with Children Check and a verbal reference are needed.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹² Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 23.

⁹³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 10.

3.5.2 The School Bus Management System and other technology

As discussed in Chapter 1, the School Bus Management System is an online portal for students and the general public to apply to use a school bus. The program was developed in 2015-16 and was managed by the Department of Transport until 2020–21. The responsibility for administering the program now rests with the Department of Education and Training.

An online system to apply for the School Bus Program was recommended by Bus Association Victoria⁹⁴ and others.⁹⁵

At the time of writing, only 12 out of approximately 300 school bus networks statewide had been added to the School Bus Management System.⁹⁶

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education and Training said that responsibility for the School Bus Management System was transferred to the Department to progress its statewide rollout. An initial analysis of the rollout process identified that the system needs additional technological capabilities before it can be implemented across all school bus networks.⁹⁷

The Committee was informed that the initial review of the process for rolling out the system will be completed in 2022 and the Department will consider progressive roll out stages after that.⁹⁸

The Committee heard the School Bus Management System could make the process of applying for a place on a school bus easier. While the information that members of the public are required to provide will not change substantially, the Department of Education and Training will explore opportunities for improved accessibility options for the public to use the system.⁹⁹ At a public hearing, Mr Bates said that he hoped the School Bus Management System would make it easier for the public to access school buses:

for the networks that are on the School Bus Management System there is an ability for members of the public to do an online application process to access the buses, and as we further roll out the School Bus Management System we hope that that will make that access easier for people to tap into.¹⁰⁰

One of the accessibility options the Department is considering is the development of a School Bus Management System app so that it can be used easily on phones.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ See for example, Wattlebank Community Group Inc, *Submission 129*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 3.

The Committee commends the digitisation of the School Bus Program application process via the School Bus Management System. The move away from a paper-based system is long overdue.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Victorian Government progress the roll out of the School Bus Management System statewide as a matter of urgency.

RATIONALE: The School Bus Management System will make applying to use the School Bus Program much easier by replacing the outdated paper form with an online application.

The additional features the Victorian Government is developing for the School Bus Management System will make it easier for the public to apply for a place on a school bus. However, there are aspects which the Committee believes could be further improved.

Correspondence from the Department of Education and Training explained how the general public can view school bus route maps and timetables on the School Bus Management System. However, they cannot check if there is spare capacity on the route they wish to use. The correspondence outlined:

In terms of the public accessing SBP [School Bus Program] information such as spare capacity, seat availability, timetables and stop information, this information can currently be provided through the coordinating school in each network. This information is only provided to approved travellers.¹⁰²

As noted in Section 3.2, some school bus routes are at capacity and there are no spare seats available for members of the general public. The Committee believes that the School Bus Management System should provide members of the public with information about whether their desired route has capacity before they begin the application process. As outlined in Section 3.5.1, the application process is already time consuming, and providing information on capacity before members of the public apply could save them from a time-consuming application on a route that is already full.

The Committee notes that the Department of Education and Training said in its correspondence, 'As more school networks are transitioned to the SBMS [School Bus Management System], greater information opportunities will be developed to report on spare capacity'.¹⁰³ The Committee believes this information should be shared through the School Bus Management System.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government ensure the School Bus Management System allows members of the public to know if there is spare capacity on their desired School Bus Program route before they begin an application to use a bus.

¹⁰² Department of Education and Training, correspondence, 16 September 2021, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 2.

RATIONALE: Currently, members of the general public must apply to use the School Bus Program before being informed of spare capacity. This order should be reversed to allow potential applicants to know if there is spare capacity before applying.

New South Wales' Transport Connected Bus Program

The Department of Education and Training informed the Committee it is considering introducing other technology features on buses to enhance the collection of information on patronage and bus location.

This includes:

- real time tracking of buses
- touch-on, touch-off technology.¹⁰⁴

These features are part of the New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program. The program is a pilot where buses, including school buses, in some regional areas are fitted with GPS and touch-on, touch-off ticketing technology. The information from these capabilities is provided to public transport users via an app.

Ms Wise from Transport for New South Wales gave the Committee an overview of the Transport Connected Bus Program. She noted a key capability is that a member of the public can see on an app when a school bus is approaching, and if it has capacity to board:

from a customer point of view you can see where the bus is and you can see if it is full. So if you were in a more remote area—because they only come twice a day, right—and hoping to get onto a school bus, if it were full you could see, 'Well, I'm not going to be able to get on that bus today'.¹⁰⁵

Ms Wise told the Committee that the scheme had only been rolled out in the past year and that any evaluation of patronage was not yet possible due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, valuable data was being gathered as part of the program which will help transport planners and bus operators determine issues such as appropriate bus sizes for routes.¹⁰⁶

The features of New South Wales' Transport Connected Bus Program allow travel on school buses to be as seamless as regular public transport. This is enabled by passenger counting technology on buses,¹⁰⁷ which means that passengers do not have to apply for a seat and have the bus route capacity checked by a school. The app simply informs them if a seat is available or not.

¹⁰⁴ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁷ Consat, *Consat Telematics delivering real-time passenger information system for rural and regional NSW*, <<https://www.consat.se/en/consat-telematics-delivering-real-time-passenger-information-system-for-rural-and-regional-nsw-australia-2>> accessed 6 October 2021.

Ms Wise also explained that the public do not have to pre-book their trip or apply for a seat on a school bus. They can simply wait at a bus stop and board it in the same way as public transport. Child safety measures are implemented by bus operators as they see fit. Ms Wise added that in many smaller communities, people using the bus were already known to the bus driver and official child safety measures were not needed.¹⁰⁸

New South Wales does not have the same child safety requirements as Victoria for the general public to access a bus. Ms Wise explained:

In terms of how it works in practice, we generally leave it up to the operators. Obviously operators have safety management systems that they have to have as part of their accreditation—I imagine your system has similar things in place in Victoria—and really they have to put in place measures around risk management, including child safety and passenger safety. In practice what a lot of drivers will do is ask any fare-paying passengers to sit up front, or sometimes if there are very small children, they will put the small kids up front.¹⁰⁹

The school bus system in New South Wales is examined further in Section 3.8.2.

While Victoria's child safety policies on school buses prevent a program like the Transport Connected Bus Program being implemented at the moment, Mr Bates from the Department of Education and Training said that the Department was considering policies that would allow for real-time tracking of school buses and touch-on, touch-off technology:

As the Committee might already know, the School Bus Management System is not live at the moment, so it does not give us real-time tracking of buses or who is on or not on a bus. But we are thinking about potential upgrades to give some of that capacity, and we are doing a pilot of touch-on, touch-off technology on one of the networks at the moment.¹¹⁰

Mr Bates added that the Department was also looking at introducing a School Bus Management System app for mobile phones.¹¹¹

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Victorian Government identify which components of the New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program can be adapted for use in Victoria, in particular the use of real-time data.

RATIONALE: The New South Wales Transport Connected Bus Program uses much more modern technology than Victoria's School Bus Program. Much of this technology would be useful in Victoria.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹⁰ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

3.6 Access to bus services during downtime

School buses may sit idle in-between school pick-ups and drop-offs. This is known as downtime. Many stakeholders suggested this window during the day would be an excellent opportunity for the Victorian Government to contract school bus operators to run public transport trips. Such trips would have the additional benefit of not having to adhere to the pre-determined school bus routes and there would be no child safety concerns or capacity constraints. Travel on school holidays and weekends may also be possible.

Mr Phillips from Country Education Partnership explained how the use of buses during the day could assist the transport needs of regional communities:

So if the bus was there and the school was not using it between 9 o'clock and 2.30, that could be open for community use, to again increase access for those people during those times, or a specific date could be set aside for community use.¹¹²

Adjunct Professor John Stanley also advocated for the use of buses during downtime:

The school bus is one step towards a better system at a regional level as a whole, and the fact that there are buses sitting around during the day—you are not going to use them all full time during the day to meet regional needs, but you can certainly use some of them to meet the needs that the local community identifies as its highest priorities.¹¹³

In principle, the Committee agrees that using school buses during downtime would be a worthwhile policy. The use of school buses for this purpose would make better use of existing resources and assist transport disadvantaged groups. This could generate social and economic benefits in regional Victoria for comparatively low cost.

However, the Committee learnt that regulations known as the Transport Standards made under the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 2002* are a barrier to this idea.

3.6.1 The Transport Standards

The Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (the Transport Standards) outline the disability access requirements for all forms of public transport, coaches, taxis and aircraft. These access requirements may include wheelchair access, boarding ramps, dedicated seating, handrails and signage.¹¹⁴

Dedicated school buses are exempt from 26 parts of the standards, mostly relating to mobility access. This means that school buses are not required to:

- have a low-floor or provide a boarding device for people using mobility aids
- provide handrails or grabrails

¹¹² Kevin Phillips, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹¹³ John Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ The Allen Consulting Group, *Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport: Final Report*, report for Infrastructure Victoria, Melbourne, 2007, p. 129.

- provide any allocated spaces for people with mobility aids
- include appropriate surfaces
- provide automatic or power-assisted doors or have doorways of a specific width to assist people with mobility impairments.¹¹⁵

The disability access standards that school buses are required to adhere to mostly relate to vision impairment, with requirements for lights and signs.¹¹⁶

Generally, school buses have steps at the entrance and do not have boarding ramps and allocated spaces within the bus to accommodate wheelchairs, mobility scooters or prams.¹¹⁷

At the time of drafting the Transport Standards in the late 1990s, it was decided that dedicated school buses would be exempt. A 2007 review of the Transport Standards said that this was because of the cost involved for bus operators to retrofit existing buses or purchase new disability compliant buses.¹¹⁸

The Transport Standards define dedicated school buses and dedicated school bus services in the following way:

- a bus is a dedicated school bus only during the time in which it is being used to provide a dedicated school bus service
- a dedicated school bus service is a service that operates to transport primary or secondary students to or from school or for other school purposes.¹¹⁹

A literal reading of the definitions suggests that if school buses were used for public transport purposes during downtime, particularly without school children on board, then they would no longer meet the definition of a dedicated school bus service. As a result, they would no longer be exempt from the Transport Standards.

This means that school bus operators conducting public transport trips during downtime should use buses that comply with disability access requirements set out in the Transport Standards. This was confirmed in correspondence from the Department of Transport:

Only 'Dedicated School Buses' are currently exempt from DSAPT [Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport]. If a bus is being used for a service other than a dedicated school bus service, then it would be required to be compliant with DSAPT.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

¹¹⁷ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ The Allen Consulting Group, *Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport*, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002* (Cth) s 1.13.

¹²⁰ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 5.

Ms Wise said that bus operators would be open to a discrimination claim if they offered public transport trips during downtime without a bus that was accessible to people with a disability. She said:

I have seen that there have been, in some of the submissions that you have received, questions about whether school buses, being idle in the day, can be used for other purposes. Obviously it is possible, but there are some things that are a bit of a barrier around some of that. School services are exempt currently from the disability standards for accessible public transport, meaning those vehicles do not have to be accessible, and because they do not, most of them are not. That is at least the case in New South Wales. That means if we were to schedule a school bus to run regular route services or more broadly during the day we would be open to a discrimination claim from someone with a disability if we were not running an accessible bus.¹²¹

FINDING 10: School buses that conduct public transport trips during downtime while children are at school are not exempt from the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002.

3.6.2 Making school buses accessible to people with a disability

The Committee was presented with arguments from submitters that school buses should be made accessible to people with a disability. This would not only allow people with a disability to travel on school buses, it would also enable public transport trips to be made during downtime.

For example, Youth Affairs Council Victoria said:

Current legislation allows school buses an exemption from the federal Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002, meaning that disabled students can be excluded from existing services. Inaccessible transport further marginalises disabled young people, negatively impacting their connections with community, education and employment. Without legislative amendments and upgrades to existing school buses, disabled students will continue to be excluded from school buses and new initiatives which use existing school bus assets. While some young people can use their NDIS funding to pay for specialised accessible transport, this is expensive and an inefficient use of funding. Further, not all disabled young people have access to the NDIS. Forcing disabled young people to use specialised transport to travel also continues harmful practices of exclusion.¹²²

This view was also held by the Victorian Council of Social Service which said the Victorian Government should advocate to the Commonwealth to remove the exemption for school buses to meet accessibility requirements. It added that in the absence

¹²¹ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 24–25.

¹²² Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 22.

of Commonwealth changes, the Victorian Government could require buses to meet accessibility standards as part of procurement or contract management.¹²³

However, the Committee was told the cost of requiring school buses to be compliant with the disability access requirements would be considerable.

Professor Unsworth from Federation University discussed the cost of retrofitting existing school buses to be accessible to people with a disability. She noted it would be difficult and not cost effective:

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.¹²⁴

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Transport said that only, approximately 2% of the 1,454 School Bus Program buses operating in rural and regional Victoria are compliant with the Transport Standards.¹²⁵

The Department gave an estimate of the costs of introducing buses that would be compliant with the Transport Standards in three categories:

- buses that operate on the metropolitan fringe
- buses that operate within the Myki boundaries including large regional centres
- all school buses in regional Victoria.

The cost estimates were as follows:

- Minimum DDA [Disability Discrimination Act]-compliance – for services that operate in the metropolitan fringe and work closely with other route/school special services – approximately 203 buses with a once of cost of approximately \$72 million.
- Medium DDA-compliance – for the above services as well as all other that operate within Myki boundaries, including Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and Latrobe Valley – approximately 340 buses with a once of cost of approximately \$125 million.
- All School Bus Services Contracts services with 1,454 buses at a total cost of approximately \$540 million.¹²⁶

In addition, representatives from the Department of Transport and the Department of Education and Training said that buses accessible to people with a disability are generally low-floor buses. This may make them unsuitable for rural and regional roads and street infrastructure such as bus stops and kerbs.¹²⁷

¹²³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 13.

¹²⁴ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹²⁵ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 4.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3–4.

Mr Foa from the Department of Transport explained:

The difficulty comes where those low-floor buses have a much longer overhang at the front and back, and so it is more difficult for them to move around an environment that has not been catered for them. So if you look at all the new growth area communities where we have got low-floor accessible buses and accessible stops, you will also see that they have got rollover kerbing on the roundabouts and on the kerbs on the corners. That is primarily to stop the nose and the tail scrapes that can occur, particularly if they are accessing a driveway arrangement or something. So it is more than that. It is more than the accessibility of the bus, it is more than the accessibility of the stop; it is also that the built environment that they are operating in becomes challenging.¹²⁸

Mr Bates from the Department of Education and Training also stated that rural and regional conditions were not suitable for low-floor disability compliant buses:

I have six nieces and nephews who have been users of the school bus system over the last 20 years, and I know from going to visit some of them in South Gippsland or outside Ballarat that the bus stop can be pretty—it is just a sort of gravel siding by the side of the road. So although we are supportive of trying to make the fleet more disability compliant, I think there really are issues around infrastructure quality, particularly for the pick-up and drop-off of children once they are out of town, if I can use that sort of wording.¹²⁹

As noted in Chapter 1, the Department of Education and Training administers the Students with Disabilities Transport Program which provides bus or taxi transport for students with a disability.¹³⁰

The Committee believes that allowing school buses to operate public transport services during downtime would provide valuable economic and social benefit to transport disadvantaged groups. However, the costs associated with introducing school buses that are compliant with the Transport Standards are considerable, with an estimated cost of \$540 million for all School Bus Program buses to be converted.¹³¹ In addition, such low-floor buses would not be suitable for some rural and regional roads.

While the Committee accepts that it would be a positive development for students with a disability to be able to access all school buses, the Department of Education and Training provides the Students with Disabilities Transport Program which meets the transport needs of this group. The Committee does, however, acknowledge the social cost of all students not being able to travel together.

The Committee does not consider it is proportionate to recommend that the Victorian Government modify or replace school buses so that they comply with the Transport Standards for the purpose of conducting public transport trips during downtime.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

¹²⁹ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 3–4.

¹³⁰ Department of Education and Training, *Presentation*, pp. 3–4.

¹³¹ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 4.

FINDING 11: The cost of requiring Victoria's School Bus Program bus fleet to comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 for the purpose of public transport during downtime would be considerable. Further, the needs of young people with disability are targeted by specific programs, such as the Students with Disabilities Transport Program.

Despite the barrier relating to the requirement for buses that are accessible for people with a disability, the Committee was presented with a substantial amount of information on the kinds of trips that would be beneficial for rural and regional Victorians during downtime.

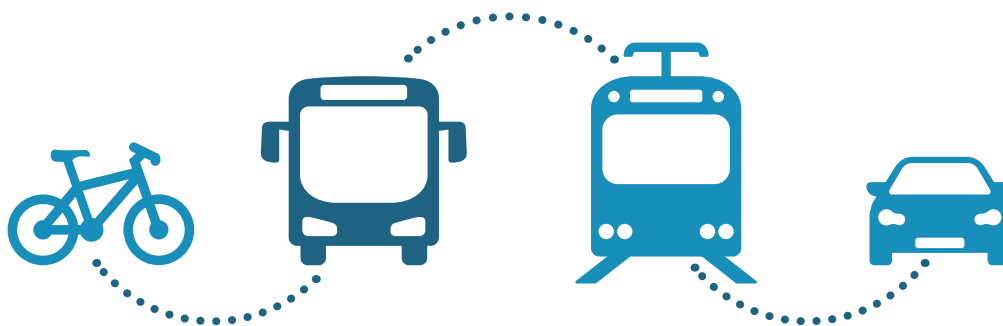
This evidence is presented in the event that disability compliant buses are made available in some areas. The Committee was provided with options for school students to use the buses during downtime, in which case the public could use the buses without being in contravention of the Transport Standards.

3.6.3 Integrated transport policies for school buses

The Committee heard that school buses could be used to provide integrated transport services for rural and regional Victorians. Integrated transport is a model that refers to journeys with 'seamless' travel across different modes of transport. Integrated transport policies require planning across the transport network as a whole including train, bus, road and cycling networks. This can also apply to funding so that budgets for transport programs in different portfolios such as health and education are used more efficiently.

Figure 3.3 gives an example of an integrated transport system.

Figure 3.3 An integrated transport system allows users to easily switch between modes of transport



Source: Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

Integrated transport policies could apply to school bus services in rural and regional Victoria during downtime by using the buses to link with other train or bus services at employment or education precincts. The Committee was told that local communities would be well placed to determine the routes they need, as the requirements of every community would be different.

In relation to funding, the Committee was told that budgets for services like community transport, patient transport and school buses could be combined into a single pool, which would produce efficiencies.

The Committee is mindful that any school bus used during downtime for public transport services should be compliant with the Transport Standards as discussed in Section 3.6.1.

Dr Jonathan Spear, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Infrastructure Victoria, told the Committee that one of its key recommendations in its recently updated 30-year infrastructure strategy was for regional public transport to be re-designed so it is better integrated and meets local needs.¹³² Dr Spear explained that this would involve 'the Victorian government working collaboratively with local transport providers and communities to determine local transport needs and make sure that the services that are being delivered actually do meet those needs.'¹³³ The document, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051* gave more detail on how governments can work with local communities to deliver integrated transport. It said:

Local collaborative governance and planning arrangements can give communities a voice and help coordinate local transport options, including bus services, community transport, school buses, commercial passenger vehicles and car-sharing. It can also guide development of an integrated and flexible service mix that meets community needs, and for services to seamlessly connect.¹³⁴

Adjunct Professor John Stanley agreed that transport planners should consult local communities to develop integrated transport plans involving school buses that take local needs into account. He said:

It is also a reason why you have got to look at the whole thing in an integrated way, because we are really talking about getting better school bus stuff in the end. But the real solution is to look at all the needs on a regional basis, and that then gives you a whole range of other resources that you could call on if you needed to, to deal with the sort of problem that you are talking about.¹³⁵

Adjunct Professor John Stanley and Associate Professor Janet Stanley explained their contribution to an integrated transport scheme in Warrnambool called ConnectU. The ConnectU model brings together community service providers and other stakeholders to pool resources, decide what the community transport needs are and deliver them. Associate Professor Janet Stanley explained how they 'set up a model regional accessibility planning delivery committee, who decide who needs what, how best to get where and what transport should be used for what, and it has actually worked very well.'¹³⁶

¹³² Dr Jonathan Spear, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051: Volume 1*, Infrastructure Victoria, Melbourne, 2021, p. 230.

¹³⁵ John Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ Dr Janet Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Adjunct Professor John Stanley elaborated on how the ConnectU model determines transport needs and allocates resources:

It got a range of different stakeholders together at a regional level to talk about what are the priorities and how can we deal with those. Some of the agencies that had spare capacity with their vehicles were prepared to make those vehicles available part of the time to fill holes, but that still sat alongside other services rather than being fully integrated with it.¹³⁷

Mr Foa from the Department of Transport explained that the Department does work with local communities to assist with its transport planning, with dedicated staff members in each region:

In terms of how we work with local communities, yes, we do have a dedicated bus planning team, but we also have throughout regional Victoria in each of our regions a go-to person around public transport in each of the regional structures. So that local intel is really, really important in then feeding back into our central bus planning team, and they are in conversation every single day.¹³⁸

He further explained that the Department also considers how school bus routes interact with the wider transport network and particularly the bus network:

our role is really in that procurement space of the School Bus Program and the school bus specials and how we then integrate those and get some synergies between our other route bus contracted services and our school bus services. So we plan and manage the school bus services program and often incorporate those contracts into other timetabled transport contracts where possible. This is becoming even more important on the fringes of Melbourne, for instance, and our teams are collectively working around the elements of the entire bus ecosystem around those new and emerging communities.¹³⁹

The Committee heard that integrated transport policies should also ensure that funding is not duplicated across different government portfolios. For example, Llewellyn Reynders, Director, Research and Economics at Infrastructure Victoria, said that services like school buses, transport for people with a disability and patient transport could be looked at holistically and their resources better coordinated:

The School Bus Program is one of a series of specialist transport services in regional Victoria that operate outside the public transport system. There are other specialist transport programs, including for people with disability, older people and patient transport services. However, all of these specialist programs operate independently from one another and generally only focus on a single cohort for a single purpose. This makes it very difficult for all of a community's transport resources to be coordinated to maximise and integrate a network of transport services that optimise the transport choices for a whole community. The regional public transport recommendation in

¹³⁷ John Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy encourages the Victorian government to look at the transport needs of communities holistically and to work to design specific solutions for each place.¹⁴⁰

Adjunct Professor John Stanley agreed, noting the separate streams of transport funding for each government portfolio could be pooled into a common funding arrangement:

So I think if Victoria could take some initiative here it would constitute something that is internationally path breaking—but it should not be that hard to do. It is really about putting a lot of the separate pots of money that individually go into transport—out of the health budget, the education budget and the transport budget—into a common pot, and if you lock those funds up like that, then you can genuinely try and identify the priorities on a regional basis, not in the silos that our current systems are leading to.¹⁴¹

The Department of Transport said that it incorporates the views of rural and regional communities in its transport planning policies. It also said it considers school buses in its integrated transport plans, however, the Committee believes more could be done. For example, in communities where school buses are available that comply with the Transport Standards and there is sufficient demand, the buses could be used during downtime for public transport purposes. These routes could be locally determined and integrated with other modes of transport.

The Committee notes that the information presented regarding integrated transport mirrors recommendation 83 in Infrastructure Victoria's, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051*. The recommendation states, 'In the next five years, redesign existing regional transport services so they are integrated, based on regional needs assessments, and sustainably funded. Use significant technological and reform opportunities to deliver innovative service models that meet local needs.'¹⁴²

The Committee supports this recommendation. It believes that the Victorian Government should continue to work with local communities in rural and regional Victoria to design and plan integrated transport services that may include school buses which are compliant with the Transport Standards.

Education first integrated transport

The Committee was told there is demand from school students undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) or Vocational Education and Training (VET) to use school buses during downtime to travel to campuses other than their schools. School bus services providing transport to students during downtime may also be able to be used by the general public without having to comply with the Transport Standards because they may still meet the definition of a dedicated school bus.

¹⁴⁰ Llewellyn Reynders, Director, Research & Economics, Infrastructure Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴¹ John Stanley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

¹⁴² Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051*, p. 230.

Mr Bates from the Department of Education and Training told the Committee about this demand:

the feedback that I am getting from within the education system is around trying to support particularly senior secondary students doing different pathways—so particularly allowing students who need to access, can I say, other campuses or trade training centres or things like that.¹⁴³

He added that the Department would be 'very supportive'¹⁴⁴ of school buses being used during the day to allow for VCAL and VET students to travel to other campuses:

We would be very supportive of a model where we might have stuff during the day where you could pick up children, particularly those that are doing VET and VCAL subjects where they will be doing some of their studies at their home secondary school and then they might be going somewhere else for particular subjects. So we would be very supportive of that sort of access.¹⁴⁵

Mr Brown from the Country Education Partnership told the Committee that there is demand from the general public to use any school bus services during downtime that would transport students between schools and vocational campuses:

I think if we actually flex the management, the administrivia and the inflexibility of the current arrangements to allow utilisation outside that sort of 8.30 to 9 o'clock time and the 3.30 to 4 o'clock time, I think for a student accessing other learning opportunities it would be seen as a real positive. But it could then add value to being seen as a community service as well. So if I pick a place like Ouyen, for example, a lot of those kids do their VET in Mildura; they have to get there. And I would think if you actually put a system together that saw a public system transporting the community from Ouyen, that incorporated students as well as the community, you might get a pick-up in that sense, provided it did not upset their school bussing systems—you know, their 9 o'clock and 3.30 scenario.¹⁴⁶

3.6.4 On-demand transport

On-demand transport was discussed as an option to reduce transport disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria. On-demand transport uses technology to connect transport users and providers.

Infrastructure Victoria noted that one of the key ways that integrated transport can be delivered in rural and regional areas is using technology and on-demand services. Dr Spear from Infrastructure Victoria said:

We have called out the opportunity for technology, particularly things like mobility as a service and on-demand services, to assist with delivering better quality services and

¹⁴³ Tony Bates, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Phil Brown, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

making the best use of the public transport resources that are available in regional Victoria.¹⁴⁷

Dr Spear also noted that on-demand services are better suited to 'less predictable and lower volume demand'¹⁴⁸ areas such as regional Victoria.

In its submission, Mallee Family Care advocated for the use of on-demand transport in regional areas to assist transport disadvantaged people. It argued that such services are suitable for smaller towns and less expensive than fixed route public transport:

The NSW Government is currently trialling a number of 'on demand' services across the state to improve connections to transport hubs, medical and other services. Instigation of a similar trial, particularly for smaller towns such as Manangatang and Robinvale would enable Government to test different service models and provide solutions where public transport currently does not exist or does not meet the needs to passengers. On-demand services could reduce the need to run more expensive fixed route services and provide a cost efficient alternative.¹⁴⁹

The Committee heard that initiatives such as the Rowville Flexibus in outer-suburban Melbourne and GisBus in Gisborne operate successful on-demand services.¹⁵⁰

However, Infrastructure Victoria and others noted there can be potential pitfalls with the use of on-demand services because they could be costly, fail to meet the access requirements of transport disadvantaged groups and that demand has yet to be measured. Mr Peter Kartsidimas, Director, Networks and Planning at Infrastructure Victoria said:

On-demand is very tricky. Every community is very different in terms of population, where they need to get to, time of day and so forth. So each on-demand service needs to be very carefully planned. Done properly, there can be some really significant benefits, but equally the costs can be quite high as well. So one of the challenges with on-demand services is what it ends up costing you per trip, and that is why when you design and plan these you need to be extremely careful ...

... So all I would say is that, yes, it is a great idea and it should definitely be looked at for regional communities, but do your homework and make sure you cost that out properly, because the downside is also not great either.¹⁵¹

Ms Wise from Transport for New South Wales discussed its experience of developing on-demand transport trials. She noted the target users for on-demand transport such as older people or disadvantaged groups may not be able to access apps that enable the use of on-demand transport and that traditional booking methods (such as telephone bookings) need to continue:

¹⁴⁷ Dr Jonathan Spear, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Mallee Family Care, *Submission 121*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 135*, p. 15; Peninsula Advisory Committee for Elders, *Submission 126*, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Peter Kartsidimas, Director, Networks & Planning, Infrastructure Victoria, 25 August 2021, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

We run a number of different on-demand services through regional New South Wales, and there are booking apps for those as well. I would say that a learning we have had from our on-demand pilot programs is that particularly in regional areas it is a slow burn to encourage booking, particularly when you think about who is more likely to use public transport—that is, people with no access to a car or older people. They are much less native users of booking apps for things, and phone booking is definitely a strong feature that we have seen in some of our bookable public transport services. But it does not mean that it is not worth it, because it is a quarter to a third; it will build up over time. It is definitely something worth investigating, it is just not—I would not recommend it as the only method of being able to book.¹⁵²

Despite these potential difficulties, the Committee considers that on-demand transport could be an effective model for school buses to deliver public transport trips during downtime. As noted by Infrastructure Victoria, on-demand transport offers more efficient use of resources in areas with low population density such as rural and regional Victoria.¹⁵³ Further research would be needed to determine the viability of using the School Bus Program to deliver on-demand public transport in rural and regional Victoria.

The use of school buses as part of an integrated transport policy that incorporates on-demand transport is discussed in Section 3.6.6.

FINDING 12: There is a potential for school buses to be used during downtime to provide on-demand public transport services in rural and regional Victoria. However, careful consideration is needed to determine the commercial viability of on-demand bus services.

3.6.5 Route buses

In addition to integrated transport routes determined by local communities and on-demand transport, the Committee heard that school buses could be used as public transport route buses during downtime. These buses would operate on routes planned by the Department of Transport.

The Department of Transport said that it already operates some school buses as public transport route buses during downtime. When asked if school buses were used in this way, the Department replied in correspondence, 'Yes, approximately 26 route town services and a further eight tech schools utilise the school bus fleet for public transport during the day when not in use as school bus.'¹⁵⁴

The Department further advised that these services are compliant with the Transport Standards because 'the 26 Town services were put in place before the DSAPT applied.'

¹⁵² Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 27–28.

¹⁵³ Dr Jonathan Spear, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 4.

And 'tech schools are considered to be exempt because they are dedicated school services.'¹⁵⁵

Mr Foa said that the Department was considering converting some school buses on the outer metropolitan fringe to public transport 'school special' route buses that would take children to school, but also be able to conduct public transport during the day:

We are doing some work around the feasibility of converting some of those metro fringe School Bus Programs into route-type school specials, as you have seen in other parts of the state. We have done it in about 20 other parts of the state. The primary need of the school specials is, of course, the universal access to education, and we want to make sure that we will have enough capacity for those school buses to do that—and many of them are at capacity.¹⁵⁶

In New South Wales, Ms Wise said that school buses that had been converted to be accessible to people with a disability were used as route buses in built up areas as well as school buses:

we have 3300-ish buses under our rural and regional bus service contract, and between 300 and 400 of those would be accessible. They are the ones that provide the route services in towns, so the town service running around Orange or Coffs Harbour. They also do provide school services. Do not get me wrong: the timetabled services at 8.15 in the morning will be carrying an awful lot of school kids around town centres.¹⁵⁷

The Committee asked the Department of Transport whether it intended to use more School Bus Program buses for route transport services during downtime. In correspondence to the Committee, the Department replied that to do so would require funding and considerable bus network planning to determine the timetables and fare schedules.¹⁵⁸

The Department also said that a significant review of contractual requirements would be required because route buses have different build specifications than school buses.¹⁵⁹ They gave an example of the build specification requirements of a metropolitan route bus, which include disability access:

- An automated anti-rollaway system.
- Fitted with a two-way radio or hands-free mobile phone so that contact may be immediately made with the driver at any time during the provision of services.
- Driver protection screens to prevent the risk of driver assault and unauthorised access to the driver's cabin area.
- Two doors for more efficient boarding and alighting.
- Low-floor – including boarding ramps and allocated wheelchair spaces.

¹⁵⁵ Department of Transport, correspondence, 10 November 2021, p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁷ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁸ Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In comparison, standard school bus vehicles are required to be fitted with the following:

- Seat belts compliant with standards provided under Vehicle Standard (Australian Design Rule 68/00 – Occupant Protection in Buses) 2006.
- Sufficient hand holds for the vehicle generally mounted on the aisle seat.
- High-mounted flashing warning lights at front and rear, to be operated while buses are stationary at bus stops.
- Appropriate warning signs to be fitted in close proximity to the flashing lights.¹⁶⁰

The Committee notes the difficulty in utilising School Bus Program buses for public transport route bus services during downtime. These difficulties extend from service planning to build specification to meet contractual requirements. The Committee does not recommend that School Bus Program buses be utilised for public transport route bus services unless they meet the needs of the Department of Transport.

3.6.6 The Committee's view on the use of school buses during downtime

The Committee believes that it is worthwhile for the Victorian Government to explore the potential of including the School Bus Program as part of a wider integrated transport policy in rural and regional Victoria. This policy could help address the wider public transport issues discussed in this part of the Committee's Report.

Such an approach will not be a one-size fits all policy. Individual communities have different needs and, where a need for public transport is established, the Government should work with local stakeholders to plan services. Such services could make use of technology including on-demand transport.

This approach is in-line with the recommendation in Infrastructure Victoria's, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051*, which advocates for integrated transport based on local needs that makes use of technology and innovative service models such as on-demand services.¹⁶¹

Within such an integrated transport policy, school buses could be used during downtime where the buses comply with the Transport Standards. The Committee acknowledges that this use could be narrow, given that only 2% of school buses are currently compliant with the Transport Standards.¹⁶²

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Victorian Government, in consultation with local communities in rural and regional Victoria, consider the potential for the School Bus Program to form part of an integrated transport policy that makes use of technology and innovative service models, such as on-demand transport.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2021-2051*, p. 230.

¹⁶² Department of Transport, correspondence, 28 September 2021, p. 4.

RATIONALE: Integrated transport should be driven by the needs of local communities. They are best placed to inform decisions made by the Victorian Government and should be consulted before an integrated transport policy is developed.

3.7 Costs and fares

One of the arguments put forward for allowing the general public to use school buses is to make better use of existing transport assets.

The Committee heard doubts about the extent to which opening the School Bus Program would be a cost-effective way to augment public transport. The key cost saving would be the fact that a large network of school buses already exists, meaning new buses would not have to be purchased. However, Mr Reynders from Infrastructure Victoria explained that the capital cost of vehicles is not the most important factor, and that driver wages and operational costs were more significant:

it is often put forward that the main problem here is the vehicles, but actually the cost of running a public transport service mostly is not in the cost of buying the bus, it is paying the driver, it is doing the maintenance and it is paying for the petrol. So even if you can access a vehicle, that does not fix the problem. You still need to find the resources to fund the whole service.¹⁶³

While the Committee heard there would be very limited costs to the program for the public to access the School Bus Program on live runs,¹⁶⁴ adding services during downtime would attract additional driver hours and fuel costs. The use of School Bus Program buses for these services would be less than commissioning a new fleet of buses, but the wage and petrol costs would still be significant.

The Committee has not provided an estimate of the additional costs that might arise if there were more members of the public accessing live runs because it did not recommend route changes to suit the general public. This would need to be quantified should the Victorian Government wish to pursue this option.

3.7.1 Fares

As noted in Chapter 1, members of the public accessing the School Bus Program must pay a fare to use school buses. Because seats must be booked for a term or a year, the fares are charged on a per-term and per-year basis. The bus fares are:

- \$120 per-term
- \$480 per-year.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Llewellyn Reynders, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁴ See for example, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, *Submission 137*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Department of Education and Training, *School Bus Program (Guidance)*, 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-bus-program/guidance>> accessed 10 March 2021.

The fares must be paid in advance of the school term or year to the coordinating school. There is no refund if a person does not use the bus on the days for which they have paid. There is no facility for members of the public to pay fares on a per-journey basis.

The Committee asked the Department of Transport if a Myki-style ticketing scheme would be possible on school buses to eliminate the need for fares to be paid in advance. In correspondence the Department replied:

There are many practical reasons why not all school buses have Myki:

- The costs associated with installing Myki on all school buses would be prohibitive and not proportional to the fare revenue.
- Many of the school bus services operate in regional and rural areas where the internet connection, which is required for Myki, is intermittent
- Myki is unable to accommodate a seat allocation system.
- SBP [School Bus Program] fares are collected by DET [Department of Education and Training] whereas Myki revenue would be collected by DoT [Department of Transport].¹⁶⁶

Given the costs of installing Myki on all school buses and the poor internet connection in some rural and regional areas, the Committee is not minded to recommend that Myki be installed on school buses.

The Committee was informed that in New South Wales, fares paid by the general public are collected and kept by the bus operator. Ms Wise explained how the system works:

under our current model of contract in regional New South Wales the bus operator keeps the fare revenue, so any decision to actually charge the fare rests with the operator. If it were the other way round and the transport department were to keep the fare revenue, then we would need to think through how we would ensure revenue protection and fare payment and those kinds of things, how you would deal with that in the contract space.¹⁶⁷

Ms Catherine Vassiliou, Acting Manager, Communities, Facilities and Emergencies at Wellington Shire Council said that bus operators could be incentivised to run services for the public during the day if they were able to keep the fare takings:

So even though the program is funded to have the vehicles and everything, they are really just kind of more active at that morning and afternoon time. So I guess it is around that funding model too—around incentivising for the contractors that if you do look at doing more of a community service as well in the middle, then you kind of access that full amount of money.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Department of Transport, 28 September 2021, correspondence, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁸ Catherine Vassiliou, Acting Manager, Communities, Facilities and Emergencies, Wellington Shire Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 25 August 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

Allowing bus operators to keep the fare takings from the general public, such as happens in New South Wales, may incentivise bus operators to encourage these fare-paying passengers. Allowing schools to have a share in the fare takings may also subsidise the costs of administering the program and incentivise them to accept fare-paying passengers from the general public.

As with the issue of costs above, the Committee has not addressed the issue of who would collect and keep fares should the School Bus Program be expanded to run during downtime. This would also need to be determined should the Victorian Government wish to pursue this option.

3.8 Examples of trials and the experience of other jurisdictions

Terms of Reference (2) ask the Committee to conduct 'an analysis of the examples and trials from other jurisdictions both locally and overseas'. This Section includes an example of a trial in Gippsland to facilitate easier public access to the School Bus Program, known as the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project. The school bus policies of New South Wales and Queensland are also briefly discussed.

3.8.1 The Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project

The Committee was provided with information about the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project which was an initiative by the Department of Transport that ran between 2006–2009¹⁶⁹ to investigate barriers to the general public accessing the School Bus Program.¹⁷⁰

The program ran 'demonstration projects' within the confines of the School Bus Program policy to provide evidence on allowing the general public access on live runs and downtime.

The demonstration projects on live running included school bus services in Bemm River and Sale.¹⁷¹ In Bemm River, the Bemm River Community Centre agreed to assist the coordinating school, Orbost Secondary College, to administer applications from the general public. Eight members of the public applied to use the service and three people used it regularly.¹⁷²

Downtime demonstration projects included:

- Seaspray-Sale Shopper Bus
- Seaspray Holiday Bus

¹⁶⁹ Professor Carolyn Unsworth, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁰ Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, p. 12.

¹⁷¹ Department of Transport, 28 September 2021, correspondence, p. 6.

¹⁷² Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, p. 17.

- Foster-Leongatha Service
- Omeo-Bright Alps Summer Bus Link
- Phillip Island Summer Shuttle.¹⁷³

Patronage on these downtime services was higher than for the trials for live running.

For example, the Seaspray-Sale Shopper bus carried approximately 10–15 passengers each trip for six months.¹⁷⁴ The Seaspray Holiday bus carried 450 people in 5 weeks over the 2007–08 holiday period.¹⁷⁵ The Omeo-Bright Alps Summer Bus Link carried between 10 and 20 passengers per trip over a seven-month period.¹⁷⁶

In correspondence, the Department of Transport outlined what it considered to be the project's successes:

The success of the project was broader than simply allowing general community access to School Bus Program services. The Project facilitated change in the following areas:

- Collation/consolidation of existing school bus policy documentation (e.g. Instructions to Principals) into a single document (e.g. School Bus Program Policy) – first time since 1989
- Opened the discussion about transport disadvantage with key stakeholders – Principals, coordinators, Bus Association Victoria, bus operators and community organisations highlighting regional/rural need to access transport services
- Development of eligibility guides, flow charts, standardised application forms and behavioural expectations (live)
- Implemented practices to minimise risk to children (live)
- Amendment to school bus contracts facilitating access (live)
- Enabled local community centre to coordinate and screen school bus access applications and to liaise with Principal, thus reducing administration burden on school (live)
- Financial benefits, allowing services to be provided at a marginal cost (downtime)

Securing enthusiastic champions aided The Project's success. Champions included The Department of Transport's Secretary, Bus Association Victoria, bus operators, DET [Department of Education and Training], DoT [Department of Transport], school principals and coordinators, and community advocates.¹⁷⁷

At a public hearing, Mr Foa from the Department of Transport said that he believed one of the key outcomes of the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project is the consolidation of the school bus policy and procedures document:

¹⁷³ Department of Transport, 28 September 2021, correspondence, p. 6.

¹⁷⁴ Department of Transport, *Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁷ Department of Transport, 28 September 2021, correspondence, p. 7.

It really did allow some consolidation of policy documentation, instructions to peer principals, signal documents around that—opened a lot of discussions between Bus Victoria and the operators as well as the school communities—and lots of really good eligibility guidelines, flowcharts and standardised application forms [which] is one area that we can improve upon in terms of the accessibility to these services.¹⁷⁸

The Committee urges the Victorian Government to consider the findings of the Gippsland School Bus Flexibility Project if it plans to facilitate greater public access on live runs.

3.8.2 New South Wales

Ms Wise from Transport for New South Wales gave an overview of the School Student Transport Assistance scheme:

Across regional New South Wales—I will focus on that, given that is the focus of the committee—we have about 3000 school buses across more than 600 contracts for school bus services, and we do permit fare-paying passengers to travel on those services, obviously subject to the capacity of the bus, so schoolchildren will always be given priority over any fare-paying passengers. And it is one of the things that I think the committee will need to think about, so I will mention it here: under our current model of contract in regional New South Wales the bus operator keeps the fare revenue, so any decision to actually charge the fare rests with the operator. If it were the other way round and the transport department were to keep the fare revenue, then we would need to think through how we would ensure revenue protection and fare payment and those kinds of things, how you would deal with that in the contract space. The figures I have in front of me are self-reported data from the operators, so I will put some caveats on that. However, up until September 2019—and I am using those figures, one, because September is when we got struck by terrible bushfires, and we have been obviously impacted by COVID for all of last year and half of this year—it was up to 60 000 trips per month that were being taken by members of the public on school buses, so that is not a small number.¹⁷⁹

What separates New South Wales from Victoria is the ability of the general public to travel on school buses without seeking the approval from the principal of a coordinating school.

Ms Wise explained how general public access on school buses developed over a number of years in response to local needs:

it is one of those things that sort of arose organically over decades. It is almost as long as we have been providing school transport that people have been doing it. Because it came from that student entitlement system, where we provided transport to so many different kids on such a large scale, there have always been a strong number of operators who are embedded in their communities who have been providing these

¹⁷⁸ Nick Foa, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Wise, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

services, and they had a lot of ownership over their services and the revenue was theirs and all of those things. So they were making calls about it long before government kind of intervened, if you know what I mean.¹⁸⁰

As discussed in Section 3.5.2, the Committee considers that elements of the New South Wales' School Student Transport Assistance Scheme should be considered in Victoria, in particular the use of real-time data.

3.8.3 Queensland

The Queensland School Bus Program is known as the Student Transport Assistance Scheme. Members of the general public can travel on the scheme as fare-paying passengers subject to capacity after students have been accommodated. Like New South Wales, bus operators collect the fare revenue. The pre-booking of seats is required on some services.¹⁸¹ The submission from Bus Association Victoria explained the commercial relationship between bus operators and passengers in Queensland:

The carriage of fare-paying passengers is a commercial arrangement between the bus operator and that passenger. It is the operator's responsibility to ensure that they have the appropriate compulsory third party insurance for the number and type of passengers carried.¹⁸²

Bus Association Victoria also explained that members of the public may lose their place on the bus if the numbers of eligible students applying to use the bus increases. There are also provisions for the driver to remove adults whose behaviour is not appropriate.¹⁸³

**Adopted by the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
10 November 2021**

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸¹ Department of Transport and Main Roads, *School Transport Assistance Scheme*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, 2021, p. 17.

¹⁸² Bus Association Victoria, *Submission 46*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A.1 Submissions

| | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----|--|
| 1. | Greater Shepparton City Council | 30. | Name Withheld |
| 2. | Name Withheld | 31. | Michael Edwards |
| 3. | Name Withheld | 32. | Timothy Portwine |
| 4. | Emma Muller | 33. | Name Withheld |
| 5. | Ross Jones | 34. | Name Withheld |
| 6. | Confidential | 35. | Jodi Schmedje |
| 7. | Name Withheld | 36. | Jenni Candy |
| 8. | Creswick Neighbourhood Centre | 37. | St Joseph's College |
| 9. | Name Withheld | 38. | Regional Catholic Education Dioceses of Victoria |
| 10. | Karen Gray | 39. | Name Withheld |
| 11. | Name Withheld | 40. | Phillip Island Community and Learning Centre |
| 12. | Name Withheld | 41. | Lynette Oates |
| 13. | Name Withheld | 42. | Anthony Martinelli-Walsh |
| 14. | Name Withheld | 43. | Bob Redden |
| 15. | Matt Swann | 44. | Glenrowan Improvers Incorporation |
| 16. | Teagan Uttridge | 45. | Numurkah Community Learning Centre |
| 17. | David Gittus | 46. | Bus Association Victoria |
| 18. | Sherrin Caird | 47. | Ballarat North Senior Citizens |
| 19. | Name Withheld | 48. | St Anne's College |
| 20. | Kylie Eicke | 49. | Krystal Styles |
| 21. | Name Withheld | 50. | Sandlant Buses |
| 22. | Name Withheld | 51. | Name Withheld |
| 23. | Karen Humphris | 52. | Brendan Paterson |
| 24. | Mandy Clingan | 53. | Robyn Neville |
| 25. | Name Withheld | 54. | Keryn Bolte |
| 26. | Name Withheld | 55. | Julian Cleary |
| 27. | Confidential | 56. | Calum Johnston |
| 28. | St Mary's Primary School | 57. | Sarah Mahoney |
| 29. | Our Lady of the Way | | |

| | | | |
|-----|---|------|--|
| 58. | Name Withheld | 91. | Wellington Shire Council |
| 59. | Brian Eddy | 92. | Name Withheld |
| 60. | Confidential | 93. | Name Withheld |
| 61. | Name Withheld | 94. | Name Withheld |
| 62. | Rebecca Beggs | 95. | Sally Gilleece |
| 63. | Name Withheld | 96. | Elizabeth Kilduff |
| 64. | Lynn Bunning | 97. | Sherryn Ross |
| 65. | Elizabeth Fenton | 98. | Name Withheld |
| 66. | Name Withheld | 99. | Melissa McCoy |
| 67. | Indigo Shire Council | 100. | Name Withheld |
| 68. | Name Withheld | 101. | Name Withheld |
| 69. | Tim Collyer | 102. | Name Withheld |
| 70. | Victorian Principals Association | 103. | Name Withheld |
| 71. | Heidi Benson | 104. | Name Withheld |
| 72. | Name Withheld | 105. | Francine Hall |
| 73. | Catherine Forster | 106. | Name Withheld |
| 74. | Kate Ranson | 107. | Amanda Campbell |
| 75. | Name Withheld | 108. | Name Withheld |
| 76. | Name Withheld | 109. | Name Withheld |
| 77. | Name Withheld | 110. | Name Withheld |
| 78. | Name Withheld | 111. | Confidential |
| 79. | Scott Field | 112. | Confidential |
| 80. | Name Withheld | 113. | Lisa Smith |
| 81. | Name Withheld | 114. | Confidential |
| 82. | Leo Dridan | 115. | Name Withheld |
| 83. | Amanda Rieniets | 116. | Name Withheld |
| 84. | Russell Summers | 117. | Name Withheld |
| 85. | Amanda Ross | 118. | Name Withheld |
| 86. | Ben Ross | 119. | Transitioning Well |
| 87. | Name Withheld | 120. | St Michael's Primary School |
| 88. | Name Withheld | 121. | Mallee Family Care |
| 89. | Principals of Cobram Secondary College, Cobram Primary School, Cobram and District Specialist School, St Joseph's Primary School, Katunga South Primary School and Cobram Anglican Grammar School | 122. | Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals |
| 90. | Name Withheld | 123. | Marist-Sion College |
| | | 124. | VicHealth |
| | | 125. | Cancer Council Victoria & National Heart Foundation of Australia |

| | |
|---|---|
| 126. Peninsula Advisory Committee for Elders | 137. Youth Affairs Council Victoria |
| 127. VICTAS Community Transport Association | 138. Country Education Partnership |
| 128. Tawonga & District Community Association | 139. Council of the Ageing Victoria |
| 129. Wattle Bank Community Group Inc | 140. Commissioner for Senior Victorians |
| 130. Vicki Dobson | 141. Name Withheld |
| 131. Hepburn Shire Council | 142. Kellie Showell |
| a. Hepburn Shire Council | 143. Name Withheld |
| 132. Infrastructure Victoria | 144. Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare |
| 133. Mildura City Council | 145. Opportunities Pyrenees Ararat and Northern Grampians |
| 134. Nicola Strating | 146. Fiona Whale |
| 135. Victorian Council of Social Service | 147. Parents Victoria |
| 136. U3A Network Victoria | |
| a. U3A Network Victoria | |

A.2 Public hearings

Tuesday, 27 July 2021

Via Zoom

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Teresa Jayet | Chief Executive Officer | Mallee Family Care |
| Phil Brown | Executive Officer | Country Education Partnership |
| Kevin Phillips | Consultant | Country Education Partnership |
| Graeme Sandlant | | Sandlant Bus |
| Professor Carolyn Unsworth | Discipline Lead Occupational Therapy, School of Health | Federation University |
| James Guy | Executive Manager, Economic Growth | City of Ballarat |

Wednesday, 11 August 2021

Via Zoom

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|------------------|---|---|
| Dr Janet Stanley | Principal Research Fellow-Urban Social Resilience Architecture, Building and Planning | University of Melbourne |
| John Stanley | Adjunct Professor Bus Industry Confederation Senior Fellow in Sustainable Land Transport | University of Sydney |
| Chris Lowe | Executive Director | Bus Association Victoria |
| Gerard Mansour | Commissioner | Commissioner for Senior Victorians |
| Suzanne Phoenix | Executive Officer | VICTAS Community Transport Association |
| Lyndon Stevenson | Chair | VICTAS Community Transport Association |
| Paul Velten | Chief Information and Infrastructure Officer | Catholic Diocese of Sale |
| Andrew Dalglish | President | Victorian Principals Association |
| Colin Axup | President | Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals |
| Gail McHardy | Executive Officer | Parents Victoria |

Wednesday, 25 August 2021

Via Zoom

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Dr Jonathan Spear | Deputy Chief Executive Officer | Infrastructure Victoria |
| Llewellyn Reynders | Director, Research & Economics | Infrastructure Victoria |
| Peter Kartsidimas | Director, Networks & Planning | Infrastructure Victoria |
| Dr Michele Lonsdale | Deputy Chief Executive Officer | Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare |
| Georgette Antonas | Manager, Policy | Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare |
| Sebastian Antoine | Research and Policy Officer | Youth Affairs Council Victoria |
| Claire Lock | | Youth Affairs Council Victoria |
| Barbara Wise | Executive Director, Transport Partnerships - Regional and Outer Metropolitan | Transport for NSW |
| Catherine Vassiliou | Acting Manager, Communities, Facilities and Emergencies | Wellington Shire Council |

Friday, 17 September 2021

Via Zoom

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|-------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Tony Bates | Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services | Department of Education and Training |
| Nick Foa | Head, Transport Services | Department of Transport |

Appendix B
**General public application form
for the School Bus Program**

B

Form 4: Application for Permission to Travel – General Public

| | | | | |
|-------|--|-------|--|--|
| Year: | | Term: | | Submit completed and signed form to the coordinating school |
|-------|--|-------|--|--|

APPLICANT DETAILS

| | | | |
|----------------|--|--------------------|--|
| First Name: | | Surname: | |
| Date of birth: | | Travel start date: | |
| Email: | | Telephone: | |

RESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|-----------|--|
| Street Address: | | | |
| Town/Suburb: | | State: | |
| | | Postcode: | |

POSTAL ADDRESS

Same as above

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|-----------|--|
| Postal Address: | | | |
| Town/Suburb: | | State: | |
| | | Postcode: | |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------|--|---------------|--|------------|--|
| Emergency contacts | 1.Name: | | Relationship: | | Telephone: | |
| | 2.Name: | | Relationship: | | Telephone: | |

Any medical problems or requirements the driver should be notified of? If yes, please provide details.

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

Which days do you intend to use this service? (please use **X** to highlight)

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|
| MON | <input type="checkbox"/> | TUE | <input type="checkbox"/> | WED | <input type="checkbox"/> | THU | <input type="checkbox"/> | FRI | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|

Verbal reference checks are required prior to travel commencing. In some circumstances, written reference checks and criminal record checks are required. Please refer to the School Bus Program Policy and Procedures for more information or speak to the coordinating school.

| | | | |
|---------------------|--|------------|--|
| Reference 1 – Name: | | Telephone: | |
| Reference 2 – Name: | | Telephone: | |

Please attach a Working With Children (WWC) check or criminal matters check if required.

Conditions of Travel

To ensure the safety of all passengers on school buses, the following conditions apply at all times.

To ensure safe travel on school buses, travellers must agree to the following:

- Make sure you and your belongings are always inside the bus.
- Not throw anything from a bus window or have anything hanging out a window.
- Place bags and other belongings in the allocated storage areas.
- Stay in your seat while the bus is moving. Wear a seat belt where fitted.
- Not distract drivers with screaming, shouting or unruly behaviour.
- When you get off the bus only cross the road when the bus has left and it is safe to do so.
- No dangerous or flammable goods are allowed on the bus, for example aerosol cans.
- Travel on the bus service allocated to you, to and from your approved bus stop only.

To ensure passengers are considerate to one another and their bus driver, they must agree to:

- In the morning, arrive at the bus stop 10 minutes prior to departure.
- Not eat, drink or smoke while on the school bus.
- In the morning, let the school and driver know if you will not be travelling home on the bus that day.
- Use a standard conversational tone and not use offensive language or call out to others on board or to passing traffic or people.
- Listen to the bus driver and bus captain. They are responsible for maintaining school bus safety and have the authority to report any vandalism or misbehaviour including but not limited to bullying or aggression.
- Leave your bike in a safe and secure place if riding to the bus stop. Public Transport Victoria and the Department of Education and Training are unable to accept responsibility for the safety of your bike.
- Behaving inappropriately on a school bus places the safety and wellbeing of all on board at risk.

Non-compliance with any of the above conditions may result in the following:

- The driver will stop the bus.
- The offender's name and full details of the breach will be recorded.
- The offender will be transported to their normal drop off.
- The breach will be reported to the coordinating principal.
- The coordinating principal will take disciplinary measures in accordance with the guidelines below.
- In rare and exceptional circumstances, and only as a last resort, drivers are authorised to eject passengers from a bus.

Following the report of a relevant incident, the coordinating principal may take the disciplinary action below:

Passengers may have permission to travel revoked at any time at the discretion of the coordinating principal. A serious offence that endangers other passengers, bus staff or property will result in immediate suspension.

Responsibilities of parents/guardians (if applicant is under the age of 18)

- Parents/guardians are responsible for transporting their children to and from authorised bus stops and their safety at the bus stop while waiting for the bus.
- It is most important that parents waiting for bus passengers at a roadside bus stop should wait on the same side of the road as the bus to prevent accidents.

School bus travel is a privilege and not a right and consequences will follow a breach of these conditions. It is understood that bus travel is provided and accepted on these conditions.

THE PASSENGER (AND PARENT/GUARDIAN IF UNDER THE AGE OF 18) MUST COMPLETE AND SIGN THIS FORM:

I certify that:

1. All the above details are true and correct.
2. I will notify the principal in writing within 7 days of any change of address.
3. I agree to pay the costs of repairs or damage to the bus, or its replacement if destroyed, caused by my own actions.
4. I consent to release this information to Public Transport Victoria (PTV) to assist with planning for transport services.
5. I agree to pay a fare of \$120 per term in advance of travel.

I understand that my permission to travel on the school bus service is subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. I may only travel where seating is available on the service after all students with prior rights have been accommodated.
2. I will make alternative arrangements if seating becomes insufficient after students with prior rights to travel are accommodated.
3. My continued access to the bus service will be subject to review at the end of each term.
4. I may not form a case or part of a case for the retention, extension or addition of services, or a route or timetable alteration, or the provision of a larger vehicle.

I acknowledge that the decision about whether I can travel on the school bus service is at the discretion of the coordinating principal and may be reviewed at any time in accordance with these terms and conditions.

I accept the authority of the coordinating principal regarding passenger discipline on the school bus service.

I agree to abide by the Conditions of Travel.

I understand that if I do not comply with the Conditions of Travel, it may result in me not being permitted to travel on the school bus service.

Passenger name (please print) _____

Passenger signature _____

Date _____

If passenger is under the age of 18:

Parent/guardian name (please print) _____

Parent/guardian signature _____

Date _____

| OFFICE USE ONLY | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Date Form Received | | Received by (name) | |
| Date Form Assessed | | Form Signed? <i>Return to Applicant if not signed</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Does the applicant live at least 1.6km from suitable public transport? | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| Reference checks | | | |
| Two verbal references checked? | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | Extra checks required? (<i>see below</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| WWC check | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A | Criminal matters check | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| | | Special case: two written references | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Application Approved | | <input type="checkbox"/> Application Declined | |
| Waitlisted? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | Total Fare payable: \$ | Fare Collected? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Has applicant been notified in writing of travel status? | | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| BUS SERVICE DETAILS | | | |
| AM Bus Service (s) | | | |
| Bus route allocated | | Bus operator | |
| Interchange details - if req. | | Bus operator | |
| Pick-up bus stop location | | Pick up time | |
| Drop off bus stop location | | Drop off time | |
| Seat number allocated | | Bus roll updated | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Comments: | | | |
| PM Bus Service (s) | | | |
| Bus route allocated | | Bus operator | |
| Interchange details - if req. | | Bus operator | |
| Pick-up bus stop location | | Pick up time | |
| Drop off bus stop location | | Drop off time | |
| Seat number allocated | | Bus roll updated | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Comments: | | | |
| IMPORTANT: | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When advising that a fare payment is required, it is important to communicate the full fare amount and the fare payable due date, prior to advising that travel is approved. The traveller or their Parents/Guardians must be advised that travel cannot be approved until fare payment (term by term) is made. | | | |
| Please ensure that all fares collected are recorded on the fares acquittal template, available on the Department's website. | | | |
| School Bus Coordinator Name: | | | |
| School Signature – Coordinating Principal / Delegate signature: | | | |
| Date: | | | |

