

Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone

Government Response

Executive Summary

The Government thanks the Committee members for their report into expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone.

No matter where Victorians live or why they travel, we're building a transport system that works for all Victorians – and gets more Victorians back into work. The Government's focus is on returning passengers to the public transport network in a COVID safe way.

We have added more services, provided a record investment in new, accessible trams, and are taking steps to optimise network performance. We have also invested in modernising onboard tram technology to enable improved real-time information to support operations and customers.

We are also implementing necessary measures to ensure our network is COVID-safe and build customer confidence. Extensive cleaning is being undertaken everyday across the network, and over 500 hand sanitising facilities are available.

We are also giving customers information about how crowded services are to enable them to make informed decisions about when they travel.

Fares policy aims to balance equity and simplicity considerations with the need to ensure sufficient revenue is returned to contribute to the cost of operating, maintaining and upgrading the public transport network.

The Department of Transport monitors fare levels and ticket types and periodically policy is updated to ensure that fares and ticketing continue to meet their objectives. In recognition of the difficult year Victorians had in 2020, the Victorian Government did not increase public transport fares in 2021.

The Government's response to the specific recommendations of the Committee is set out below.

Response to Specific Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government undertake modelling on the impact of COVID-19 on public transport usage in Victoria, including, but not limited to, patronage and demand.

This recommendation is supported.

The monitoring of public transport patronage is part of the Department of Transport's business as usual processes. The Department has monitored the impact of COVID-19 on the transport network throughout the course of the pandemic. The Department has also prepared modelling of future transport demand and will continue to update this modelling as new information becomes available.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government expand public transport reimbursement provisions in the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme to include public transport travel between medical appointments and patients' and carers' accommodation in Melbourne during the course of a patient's medical treatment.

This recommendation is not supported.

The Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) covers eligible Victorians and approved escort(s) who have no option but to travel more than 100 kilometres one way or an average of 500 kilometres a week for one or more weeks to receive approved medical specialist services. It is intended to help eligible Victorians by subsidising their travel and accommodation costs.

The VPTAS guidelines set out the scheme's eligibility criteria, subsidy rates and conditions and are regularly reviewed to ensure the available resources deliver equitable outcomes. Many patients who claim VPTAS assistance travel for treatment to locations other than Melbourne, which may or may not have accessible public transport. The change proposed in this recommendation would not be equitable, because it would provide greater assistance to patients who travel to Melbourne.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Government extend the Free Tram Zone one stop to the 'Arts Precinct St Kilda Road' stop.

This recommendation is not supported.

The Victorian Government considers the current boundaries of the Free Tram Zone are appropriate, particularly considering the costs of extending the Free Tram Zone and competing priorities for access to subsidised public transport.

As outlined in the introduction to this response, the Victorian Government is focussed on delivering a transport network that works for all Victorians and gets more Victorians back into work. This includes making public transport journeys more comfortable, reliable, and accessible, in a COVID-safe way.

Extending the Free Tram Zone would likely exacerbate overcrowding, and further displace longer paid trips by commuters who are unable to board. The free travel also provides the most benefit to people who live within the Free Tram Zone or work in the area but who drive a car, walk or bike to get to work in the CBD.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Government extend the Free Tram Zone one stop to 'Casino/MCEC' stop.

This recommendation is not supported.

The response to recommendation 4 applies equally to this recommendation.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Government establish an application scheme and criteria for public event organisers to apply for free tram travel along a designated route for the duration of an event.

This recommendation supported in part.

Currently, organisers of large events and conferences can arrange special public transport ticketing for the event's participants through prior arrangement with the Department of Transport. The Department will provide to eligible and approved event organisers, who pay the required fees, a branded artwork template for the organisation to use on event participant passes. The participant pass can then be used as a special event public transport ticket.

The Government considers that the existing arrangements provide sufficient flexibility for public event organisers to utilise free tram travel for specific events if they wish to do so, while also acknowledging that tram travel is not the most appropriate for all public events and alternatives, such as buses, trains or active transport, may be more appropriate.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government review all existing or emerging programs that provide public transport subsidies to school aged children and report to Parliament about the implementation and performance of those programs, with a view to improving them.

This recommendation is supported in part.

All public transport trips in Victoria are heavily subsidised by the Victorian Government, with school students receiving additional subsidies. All school students are eligible for concession travel (50 per cent discount) and have access to the Victorian Student Pass, with regional school students in some towns able to access a Regional Student Pass.

In recognition of the difficult year Victorians had in 2020, the Victorian Government did not increase public transport fares in 2021. Myki and regional fares remain at 2020 rates to ease the financial pressure on Victorians and encourage people to return to the public transport network as restrictions ease.

School students are further supported through the following Government travel assistance programs provided through the Department of Education and Training: the School Bus Program (co-delivered with the Department of Transport) and the Conveyance Allowance Program, which operate in rural and regional Victoria, and the Students with Disability Transport Program that operates state-wide. These travel assistance programs operate separately and in addition to existing public transport services and further assist students with travel to and from school and educational settings.

The Department of Transport periodically reviews fare settings, including those that support school students, with a view to improving the settings where possible.

Recommendation 7

That the Victorian Government extend the Early Bird travel scheme to include metropolitan tram and bus services.

This recommendation is not supported at this time.

The Early Bird scheme was introduced for metropolitan train travel to encourage commuters to consider travelling at less busy times to alleviate overcrowding. Metropolitan rail was at that time the mode that was most crowded during the morning peak but had additional capacity on earlier services.

For a public transport system that encourages multi-modal journeys through fully integrated fares, there may be merit in-principle in extending the Early Bird scheme to include metropolitan tram and bus services. It would encourage commuters to consider travelling earlier to alleviate crowding on peak tram services and to catch the bus to the train station, which could alleviate car parking capacity issues at train stations.

However, the Department of Transport estimates that it would result in foregone revenue of approximately \$7.1 million per year to extend the Early Bird scheme to include metropolitan tram

and bus services and additional capital costs to acquire more buses and trams and configure the ticketing system.

Recommendation 8

That the Victorian Government undertake an assessment of the merits of transport network pricing and publish its findings, including its impact on rural and regional Victorians.

This recommendation is not supported.

The Victorian Government has no plans to introduce tolling on existing roads.

To be prepared for future demands on the transport network, the Victorian Government will continue to work with the Commonwealth and independent bodies such as Infrastructure Victoria to understand and consider all options that can help us to continue to build a transport system that works for all Victorians.

Recommendation 9

That the Department of Transport continue to investigate technology that improves the collection of patronage and journey data on Victoria's public transport network, particularly on the tram network.

This recommendation is supported.

Investigating technology that improves the collection of patronage and journey data is part of the Department of Transport's business as usual processes.

The Department is actively working on enabling Automatic Passenger Counting data on all E-Class trams. The RideSpace initiative is also trialling Automatic Passenger Counters on B-Class trams. The combination of these two initiatives will cover some of the busiest tram routes, including routes 96, 86, 11 and 59. Work is underway to identify a suitable solution for the remaining fleet.

In addition, train station barrier count data has been incorporated to improve patronage estimation for trains. Modelling of train service usage will be expanded to provide indicative patronage on regional and metropolitan train services.

The Victorian Government has invested in modernising the tram automatic vehicle monitoring system that enables management of tram operations including communication with drivers and monitoring the location and status of trams. Components of the backoffice system that enable data from the onboard systems to be used for TramTracker, operational performance, vehicle maintenance and tram location will also be upgraded.

Recommendation 10

That the Victorian Government continue to work with the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner to ensure its policy for the collection, use and disclosure of patronage and journey data on Victoria's transport network is in line with the Information Privacy Principles in the Privacy and Data Collection Act 2014.

This recommendation is supported.

The Department of Transport continues to work with the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner to ensure that its collection, use and disclosure of patronage and journey data

complies with the Act and other applicable legislation such as the Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous Act) 1983 (TCMA) and the Freedom of Information Act 1982.

The Department collects non-identifiable personal information (i.e. the number of people on a tram, myki Primary Account Numbers and myki LLSC card key details) through surveys and myki touch-on and off.

The data collected is only shared if the release of information is in accordance with the Act and other applicable legislation. Prior to sharing the information with another party, a data sharing agreement is prepared. The Department conducts an Information Value Assessment for the data that may be disclosed.

The Department ensures that the information collected is kept secure and that the Victorian Protective Data Security Framework is complied with. When the information is no longer required, the Department takes reasonable steps to destroy or permanently de-identify any personal information that is collected.

Recommendation 11

That the Department of Transport and public transport operators continue to improve the system by which operators report disruptions to the Incident Control Centre, including improved vehicle location technology.

This recommendation is supported.

The operators' (Metro Trains, Yarra Trams and Transdev) control centres work independently during normal service, with the Department of Transport coordinating communication and information during disruptions through its Incident Control Centre (ICC), as appropriate.

The Department supports improved visibility of public transport vehicle locations during emergencies, extreme weather events and normal day to day tracking. The Department has visibility through the resource of Smartrack and Metro Connect for bus and Metro Trains.

Improved technology will support visibility of tram, train and bus during major incidents when standing up an Emergency Management Team in the Traffic Operations Centre and during activation of the ICC.