



Submission to the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria

June 2021

To:

The Secretary

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Parliament House, Spring Street

EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Via email to: schoolbusesinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

Prepared by:

Lauren Henley

Policy Officer

Council on the Ageing Victoria

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Authorised by:

Tina Hogarth-Clarke

Chief Executive Officer

COTA Victoria

About COTA Victoria

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of people aged over 50 in Victoria. For 70 years in Victoria, we have led government, corporate and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing.

Today our focus is on promoting opportunities for and protecting the rights of people 50+. We see an ageing population as a time of opportunities for personal growth, contribution and self-expression. We believe there are obvious National, State, community, family and individual benefits from this approach. We are also focused on the protection of the rights of people aged 50+.

COTA Victoria is a not-for-profit member-based organisation run by, for and with Victorians aged 50+. We fund our activities and services through the support of government, members, philanthropic trusts, businesses and the public. We have an experienced Board, highly qualified, permanent staff located in a central Melbourne office location and a broad State membership. We also have over 130 community volunteers throughout Victoria with skills in training, group facilitation, policy development and advocacy, including volunteers bi-lingual in a number of languages. We work with local government, senior citizen centres, community houses and a broad range of community and service organisations.

COTA Victoria is supported by financial assistance from the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments.

Introductory comments

Thank you for providing COTA Victoria with an opportunity to submit feedback to inform the Inquiry Into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria. Our submission will respond primarily to clauses 1 and 4 of the terms of reference for this inquiry as set out below:

(1) an independent analysis of the transport disadvantages experienced by regional and rural Victorians, specifically youth, the elderly and low-income households;

(4) identifying any existing or potential barriers to allowing public access to the mainstream school bus network.

Addressing the transport disadvantage that is experienced by older people in rural and regional areas is critical to meeting the needs of Victoria's aging population. Right now, more than 20% of Victorians are over the age of 60 and this number is rapidly increasing. In fact, people aged 85+ are the fastest growing population group in Victoria.

Older people are less likely than the general population to live in major cities.ⁱ It is estimated that by 2031, a third of Victorians living in rural and regional areas will be over the age of 60.ⁱⁱ

50 % of people over the age of 65 identify as having a disability and more than 80 % have at least one long-term health condition.ⁱⁱⁱ In some cases, these factors can affect mobility and prevent people from being able to drive.

Impacts of transport disadvantage on older people in rural and regional Victoria

Despite the introduction of Victoria's Regional Network Development Plan in 2016, the continued reliance on cars and limited transport options means people in rural and regional Victoria who cannot drive or afford to run a car experience additional disadvantage.

Between October 2017 and March 2018, COTA Victoria conducted 22 Listening Posts throughout rural and regional Victoria to investigate the issues of greatest concern to older residents. Transport was raised as a key issue at all 22 Listening Posts. Impacts of lack of access to transport identified included:

Increased risk of social isolation and loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness have been linked to a range of health problems, including mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, dementia, high blood pressure, lowered immunity and premature death.^{iv} It is therefore critical that we implement measures to minimise social isolation and loneliness amongst older adults.

The older people we spoke to during our 2017 listening posts were clear in their view that there is a strong link between mobility and/or access to transport and social participation. Older people recognise that transport plays a critical role in helping them build and maintain social connections as they age.

Increase in sedentary behaviour

When older people are disconnected from their communities, this can lead to an increase in sedentary behaviour. Estimates suggest that around half of the physical decline associated with old age can be attributed to physical inactivity.^v This is because sedentary behaviour in older adults can lead to a decline in physical strength, balance, confidence and mental health. It can also increase the risk of accidents and falls. Increasing transport options that will effectively connect older people with their communities may help facilitate active aging by reducing sedentary behaviour.

Difficulty accessing medical services

Older people generally access health care services at higher rates than younger people.^{vi} 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.

Older people have told us that there are a range of factors that influence whether they attend a medical appointment or simply stay at home because it's too difficult to get there. These factors include:

- Lack of accessible bus services.

- Long waiting times when changing modes of transport
- Inability to walk long distances
- Inability to access timetable information that is increasingly provided online
- Difficulty accessing multiple modes of transport in order to travel to a particular destination
- Fear of navigating between transport centres and hospitals

Reluctance to give up driving

Many older people express concern about having to give up their driver's license as they age. This is because they risk being disconnected from their local communities if convenient and affordable alternatives are not provided.

According to RACV, the negative impacts associated with the cessation of driving include loss of independence, difficulty travelling to and from appointments, feelings of loss of control and social isolation and loneliness. These impacts are shown to be greatest for older people living in rural areas who have less access to alternative transport options.^{vii} As a result, older people living in these areas may be more reluctant to give up their license even when it is no longer safe for them to be driving.

Increased risk of elder abuse

When people do not have access to transport services that enable them to remain independent, this can result in them having to rely on other people for support. For example, relying on family members to drive them to medical appointments or help them get their groceries. Dependency is a known risk factor for elder abuse which means that the likelihood of elder abuse is higher amongst older people facing transport disadvantage. Social isolation is also a known risk factor for elder abuse, which is clearly exacerbated by a lack of transport options.

What is needed to address transport disadvantage for older people in rural and regional Victoria?

Expanded use of school buses

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. It is a false economy, however, to assume that this gap can be adequately addressed solely by relying on volunteer drivers. This approach would still require significant oversight from Government. In particular, systemic issues such as insurance and liability must be addressed to ensure resources are fully utilised.

There will not be a "one size fits all" approach to the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria. It is important that each township is looked at individually and that solutions are explored through co-design with people experiencing transport disadvantage in each specific location. This will ensure the solutions that are put in place are responsive to consumer demand.

Recommendation 1:

Any future decisions regarding the expanded use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria be made in close consultation with local residents and, in particular, those facing transport disadvantage such as older people and people with disability.

Increased investment in community transport

The expanded use of school buses alone will not fully address the level of transport disadvantage that exists for older people living in rural and regional Victoria. The critical role of community transport was recognised by Commissioner for Senior Victorians, Gerard Mansour in his 2020 report, *Aging Well in a Changing World*. His report states:

“Community transport was identified as a vital form of affordable door-to-door transport for many vulnerable people, including some older people and people with disabilities. It enables users to get around their local communities, participate in life fulfilling activities, do shopping, visit chemists and attend essential appointments such as with doctors and other services.”

Commissioner Mansour subsequently recognised the need for the availability of community transport services in rural areas to support older people to age-in-place at home and stay engaged with their community. While school buses could be integrated into a model for community transport in rural and regional areas, this approach would still require adequate funding, regulation and oversight.

At present, Victoria’s Community Transport system is underfunded and unsustainable. Recent research undertaken by the VICTAS Community Transport Association (VTCTA) indicates that funding needs to be increased eightfold just to achieve parity with other states. As an example, while New South Wales receives funding of around \$8 per person for community transport, Victoria receives just \$1 per person. This limited funding is preventing community transport providers from keeping up with consumer demand. As such, many older people living in rural and regional areas are unable to access these vital services. While Victoria’s Regional Network Development Plan does acknowledge the important role of community transport, there has been no meaningful commitment to improving access to community transport during the lifespan of the plan.

Earlier this year, COTA Victoria conducted a focus group to ask older people about their experience with community transport. Participants cited the following barriers:

- Providers are experiencing a dramatic increase in requests and are reporting that they have had to decline nearly 1,000 service requests per month.
- Community Transport is not available in all parts of Victoria.
- Eligibility criteria can vary between services.
- Some providers only provide support to pensioners. Older people tell us that services should consistently be available to self-funded retirees who possess a Health Care Card.

- Fees can vary greatly between services. We have heard from a number of older people who had been referred to providers with extremely high fees which prohibited them from accessing the service.
- There are restrictions on what Community Transport can and cannot be used for. Some providers will only transport passengers to medical appointments, and some will only transport passengers to social outings. The focus needs to be on the individual needs of each older person.
- Community Transport services that are operated by Local Councils generally only operate within their municipality. This prevents older people from being transported to destinations outside of their immediate local Government area.
- People living in residential aged care are unable to access community transport services. This isolates these older people from programs and activities in the community.

Recommendation 2:

The Victorian Government Invest in a feasibility study to determine the demand and most suitable model for a community based, supported transport program to service transport disadvantaged Victorians. This study would include a social return on investment study and provide the Victorian State Government with a thoroughly costed program to be funded and regulated by the Department of Transport.

Recommendation 3:

Subsequent to the implementation of recommendation 1, the Department of Transport develop a coherent policy framework around the role, function and operation of community transport to ensure its sustainability.

Expanded eligibility for the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

While taxi services can also play a key role in facilitating door-to-door transport for many older people, they are often unaffordable for older people on limited incomes. At present, the Multipurpose Taxi Program (MPTP) is only available to Victorians with a severe and permanent disability. We believe that the program should be expanded to provide support to older people who have relinquished their driver's license and have difficulty with mobility.

Recommendation 4:

The Multi-Purpose Taxi Program be expanded to provide support to people who:

- are aged 75 or older;
- have failed a fitness-to-drive test or have surrendered their driver's license to VicRoads; and
- possess a Centrelink issued concession card or health care card.

A holistic approach to transport planning in rural and regional areas

By drawing on the World Health Organization's [Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide](#), communities can be supported to create flexible and responsive transport services to address the mobility and participation barriers facing older people in rural and poorly

serviced communities. Key actions and deliverables aimed at addressing transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas must be adequately captured under the next Regional Development Plan and the Ageing Well Framework that is currently being developed by the Victorian Government.

Recommendation 5:

The Victorian Government ensure that actions and deliverables relating to addressing transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas are included in Victoria's next Regional Development Plan and Victoria's Ageing Well Framework.

Concluding comments

Thank you once again for providing COTA Victoria with an opportunity to submit feedback to inform this inquiry. It is our hope that the Committee will consider the need for a more holistic approach to the provision of local, community-based transport options to address transport disadvantage for people living in rural and regional areas. If you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission in greater detail, please contact COTA Victoria's Policy Officer, Lauren Henley. Lauren can be contacted by phone on [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]

ⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) 'Older Australia at a glance, Regional & remote communities', accessed 16 June 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australia-at-a-glance/contents/diverse-groups-of-older-australians/regional-remote-communities>>.

ⁱⁱ Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2016) 'Aging is Everyone's business: A report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians', accessed 19 June 2021, retrieve from <<https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/-/media/seniors/files/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-is-everyones-businessweb.pdf?la=en&hash=E7A9C37DB2DEA4D1ACDA9EE2D52670C644B24635>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) '44300DO020_2018 Disability Ageing and Carers Australia Summary of Findings 2018', accessed 20 June 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.coursehero.com/file/67294142/44300do020xls/>>.

^{iv} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) 'Social isolation and loneliness', accessed 2 October 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>>.

^v World Health Organization (2002) 'Physical inactivity a leading cause of disease and disability, warns WHO', accessed 1 August 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/release23/en/>>.

^{vi} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016) 'Health care use by older Australians', accessed 7 August 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/0b26353f-94fb-4349-b950-7948ace76960/ah16-6-17-health-care-use-older-australians.pdf.aspx>>.

^{vii} RACV (2016) 'Mobility beyond driving', accessed 20 June 2021, P3.