

## **Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria**

Mr Gerard Mansour

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Gerard Mansour

**Commissioner  
for Senior  
Victorians**



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

Submission



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## Commissioner for Senior Victorians

Gerard Mansour was appointed Victoria's first ever Commissioner for Senior Victorians in August 2013. The Victorian Government created this role as part of its response to the Victorian Parliamentary *Inquiry into Opportunities for Participation for Victorian Seniors*.

At the end of 2016, as part of the Victorian Government response to the Family Violence Royal Commission, the Commissioner was asked to play an additional role as Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention.

In May 2019, the Victorian Government announced the reappointment of Mr Mansour as the Commissioner for Senior Victorians for another four years.

The Commissioner for Senior Victorians provides advice to the Victorian Government on issues relevant to senior Victorians and positive ageing and participation, as well as being an independent public voice to educate the community on seniors' issues including on prevention of elder abuse. He actively promotes the positive contribution of seniors, encourages seniors to fully participate in our community and seeks to build greater respect for the rights of older people. The Commissioner meets regularly with seniors and seniors' organisations from across Victoria to discuss a wide range of matters relevant to people as they age.

A key component of the role is to actively advocate for a "seniors' perspective" in government deliberations on issues relevant to senior Victorians including positive ageing, participation, and the needs of vulnerable, at risk and disadvantaged seniors.

The Commissioner also promotes community awareness and understanding of related matters such as advance care planning, use of powers of attorney and loneliness and isolation among older people.

As the Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention, he has provided significant policy advice on the prevention of elder abuse, and the importance of supporting multicultural and emerging communities.

This submission draws on findings from the Commissioner's work on isolation and loneliness and ageing well, particularly his reports *Ageing is everyone's business - a report on social isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians* (2016)<sup>1</sup> and *Ageing well in a changing world* (2020).<sup>2</sup>

## Scope of this submission

In responding to the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria, this submission will focus on the following Terms of Reference:

- (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; and
- (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.

The submission will consider:

- demographics of population ageing
- Importance of mobility and local transport for senior Victorians
- the valuable role that mainstream school buses could play in the lives of older people
- the potential for utilising the school bus infrastructure more broadly

<sup>1</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2016) *Ageing is everyone's business*. p 46 <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/Services-Information/Commissioner-for-Senior-Victorians/Ageing-is-everyones-business>. Accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world* <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-well>. Accessed 10 May 2021

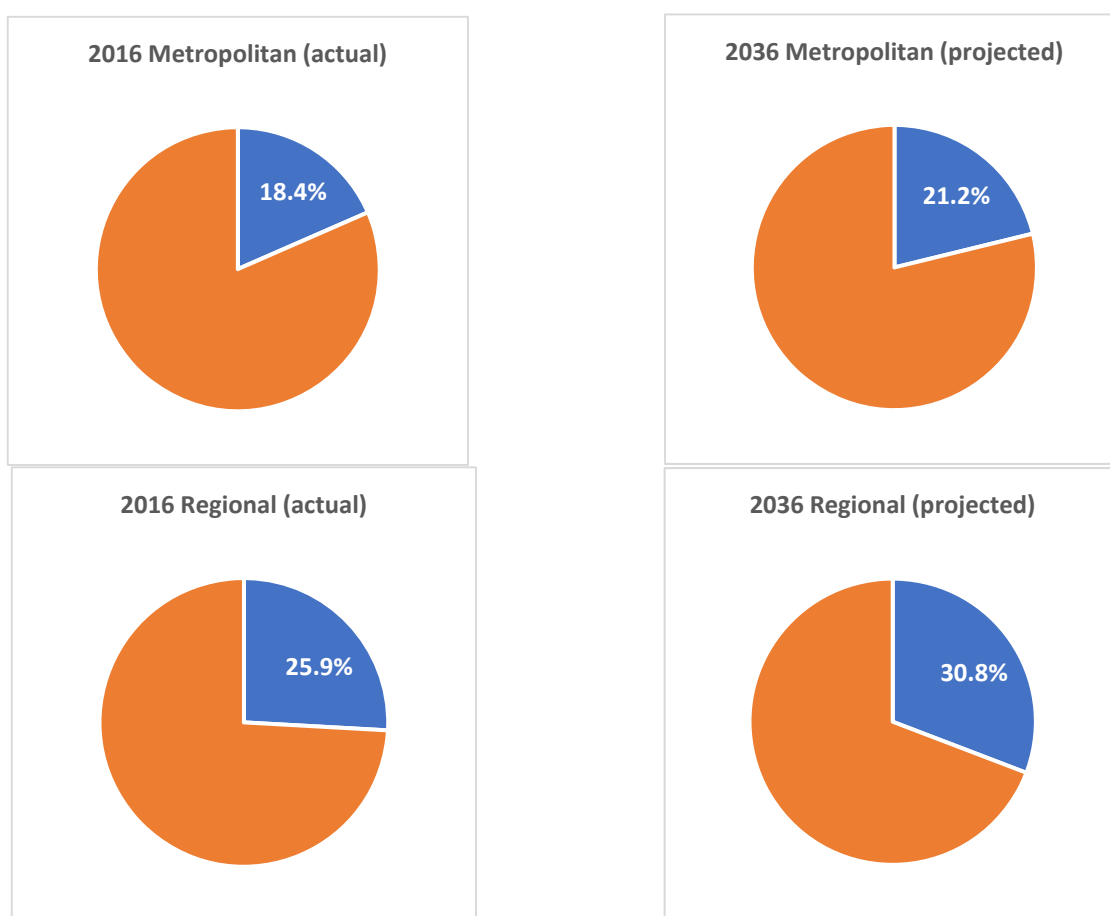
- social and community benefits of improving mobility options
- the need for a wider discussion about community transport.

### Population ageing

Victoria’s population is ageing and will continue to age for the next four decades, becoming more acute due to the two recent trends – declining fertility and cessation of immigration due to the pandemic.

Population ageing is more pronounced in regional Victoria than in metropolitan Melbourne. In 2016, 18.4 per cent of Victorians living in the Greater Melbourne area were 60 years of age or older, compared with at least 25.9 per cent in regional Victoria. In 2036, these ratios will increase to 21.2 per cent in the Greater Melbourne area and 30.8 per cent in regional Victoria (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Victorian metropolitan and regional population 60 years of age or older, 2016 actual and projected for 2036



Source: Victoria in Future 2019<sup>3</sup>

The ageing of the population in regional Victoria has been exacerbated by the shift of younger people from regional and rural areas into more highly populated metropolitan regions. This has left many rural communities with fewer resources and services available to support the remaining older population. However, the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have seen changes to migration between

<sup>3</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2019) Victoria in Future 2019 - Population Projections 2016 to 2056. p 11. [https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0032/332996/Victoria\\_in\\_Future\\_2019.pdf](https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/332996/Victoria_in_Future_2019.pdf). Accessed 24 May 2021.

metropolitan and regional and rural areas in Victoria. In the year to September 2020, regional areas outside the capital cities had the highest net gain on record.<sup>4</sup>

There was a 13 per cent drop in people moving to Melbourne from regional Victoria in the six months to September 2020. This drop in departures drove the record largest six-monthly net gain of people regional Victoria has experienced (8,600 people).<sup>5</sup> This increase in population may have implications for demands on local transport options in the future.

### *Ability to travel around in the community*

It is important to note just how important personal mobility is for senior Victorians. The ability to maintain personal mobility and have access to transport are major enablers of social participation, health management and prevention of social isolation and loneliness. Safe localised transport plays a key role in enabling older people to meet and take advantage of social participation opportunities.

In November 2020, the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Luke Donnellan, launched the Commissioner's report *Ageing well in a changing world*.<sup>6</sup> The findings of this report were based on feedback from older Victorians, including face-to-face consultations and an online survey, responded to by 4,726 individuals. Respondents to the survey were asked to rank factors that research has identified as being important to independence as one ages.

Most relevant to this inquiry, 92 per cent of respondents ranked 'personal mobility' as 'highly important'. This was the second highest rated factor of importance in the survey results after 'having secure housing or accommodation'.

The feedback obtained from the Ageing Well consultations and survey made it possible to identify eight key attributes of ageing well from the perspective of older Victorians, including the attribute of "being able to get around", including having access to cost-effective local transport options.

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. Forty-three per cent of respondents to the Ageing Well survey rated costs/affordability/living expenses as a factor that reduces quality of life (see Table 1.)

**Table 1: Highest rated factors that reduce quality of life<sup>7</sup>**

Priorities for Health, Social Wellbeing and Independence	Proportion of respondents (%)
Cost/affordability of activities/living expenses	43
Lack of local opportunities that meet my interests	36
Lack of information on what's available in my community	35
Lack of adequate and convenient parking at facilities in my community	34
Being unprepared for life changing events	29
Experiencing ageism, lack of respect	28
Feeling unsafe when out in the community	28

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government Centre for Population (2021) *Migration between cities and regions: A quick guide to COVID-19 impacts*. <https://population.gov.au/docs/the-impacts-of-covid-on-migration-between-cities-and-regions.pdf> . p. 5. Accessed 22 June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Op cit. p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world* <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-well>. Accessed 10 May 2021

<sup>7</sup> Op cit. p 19

*“There are costs in having social connections and participating but we can’t afford this.”*

Quote from consumer consultations 2019

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. There are areas of Victoria where there is no public transport - buses, taxi and trains are not provided. For people in these more isolated areas, transport may be costly and not easily accessed. In consultations on ageing well, seniors from rural areas described the problems and circumstances they face from limited transport options, for example where an afternoon appointment may entail an overnight stay due to infrequent public transport services.<sup>8</sup>

There are also the difficulties caused by the limited range and amount of wheelchair accessible transport and the varying capabilities of public transport and commercial passenger vehicle drivers when catering for older people using walker frames.

Quotes from community consultations 2019

*‘Accessible public transport ... is not available such as low step trams and buses.’*

*‘Not enough emphasis on mobility. Without mobility you can’t get to the gym, pool, walking group, interests. You then become isolated and disconnected from the community.’*

*‘Loss of licence and not being able to drive. The impact is financial too and means you have to rely on others, but they are not always available.’*

## *Impacts of isolation and loneliness*

This feedback reinforced the findings of the Commissioner’s 2016 research in on isolation and loneliness and older people. *Ageing is everyone’s business - a report on social isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians*, noted the value older people place on personal mobility and access to localised transport and the important role of these in enabling social interaction. Low levels of mobility and/or lack of transport options are key risk factors for isolation and loneliness. Older people have a clear view of the strong links between mobility, access to transport and social participation.<sup>9</sup>

The older people most at risk of social exclusion and reduced access to services through lack of transport options, include people on low incomes, people with disabilities, older women, and those living with dementia or chronic health conditions. This is exacerbated for many who are living in regional and rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

*‘A lady in our local community had her husband pass away. She couldn’t drive so she was out on the farm all by herself.’*

<sup>8</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world*, op cit. p. 39

<sup>9</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2016) *Ageing is everyone’s business*. Op cit p 46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 15

## Quote from community consultations 2015

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.

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.<sup>11</sup>

### *Use of existing bus resources*

In *Ageing is everyone's business*, a set of six 'building blocks' was identified as the basis for an integrated approach for action to address social isolation and loneliness among older people. These include "address(ing) personal mobility and local transport issues by building on existing networks to facilitate seniors' access to services and involvement in local activities".<sup>12</sup>

The Parliamentary Inquiry has been asked to consider "extending school buses for use by the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians", including use by older people in the community.<sup>13</sup>

### *Opportunities to expand use of bus resources*

Mainstream school buses play a valuable role in local communities transporting students to and from their schools. They could also prove valuable to a broader cohort of local users if older passengers wishing to travel to the same destination or vicinity were able to use spare seats on the school buses. Regional and rural communities have established comprehensive transport infrastructure with school buses services that may sit idle during the day when not required to transport students. School bus timetables could be assessed to identify and utilise "down time" to provide local community transport. This includes school buses that have been adapted to carry students with disabilities.

Use of underutilised school buses during downtimes (between morning and afternoon drop-offs) could provide flexible options for older people to get to appointments, undertake essential tasks such as shopping and participate in community activities such as local groups. Buses that have been adapted for use by students with special needs could be valuably used to transport adults with disabilities.

A shared approach to local transport options also provides an opportunity to promote intergenerational understanding with both young people and older people being encouraged to acknowledge and respond to the specific needs of each other. This could be through initiatives connecting schools with neighbourhood houses and local groups such as University of the Third Age (U3A) through use of bus routes.

Expanding the use of school and disability service buses would have the added benefits of providing additional paid hours for school and disability bus drivers, and skills development, for example training in assisting frail older people and in meeting the needs of older passengers who may be at greater risk of injury due to slips, trips and falls.

### *Social and community impacts of improving mobility options*

The Commissioner has learned from his research and consultations that locally available transport options are vital for the wellbeing of senior Victorians, particularly those living in regional and rural communities. Maintaining face-to-face social connections with family, friends and community is essential to mental and

<sup>11</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2016) *Ageing is everyone's business*. Op cit. p 20

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 2

<sup>13</sup> Parliament of Victoria (2021) inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria - Terms of Reference. <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/eic-lc/article/4613>. Accessed 10 May 2021.



physical wellbeing. Opportunities for social interactions need to be affordable and accessible, provided locally or linked to good local transport options.<sup>14</sup>

Expanding existing local school and disability bus systems will enable a greater number older people to get around their local communities and attend essential appointments such as medical or specialist appointments, or access other health services. In addition, mobility and transport options play a vital role in enabling older people to participate in activities such as visit the local library, do shopping, visit chemists, and attend local groups.

*'Able to be involved including able to transport yourself.'*

*'Access to transport. Be able to get to social clubs, events and appointments.'*

Quotes from consumer consultations 2019

### *Community transport*

The Inquiry into extending school buses for use by the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians leads us to the question of the need for a broader discussion about community transport in Victoria, particularly given the impact of an ageing population.

The Senior Victorians Advisory Group was formed in late 2020 and is chaired by the Commissioner for Senior Victorians, who reports to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers. The role of the group is to inform initiatives, policy and program development across the Victorian government on the needs of older people, including those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged, particularly in the bushfire and COVID-19 response and recovery, and on approaches across government to ageing well in Victoria. by members of the Senior Victorians. The Advisory Group has identified 'community transport' as a key priority for older people.

While community transport responsibilities are split across federal, state and local government in terms of funding and service delivery, it is clear that there is unmet need for community transport, particularly among older people in rural and regional Victoria. Utilising spare capacity in community resources including school buses is an important step forward in addressing this need.

<sup>14</sup> Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world*, Op cit. p. 29