

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

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Inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria by the Victorian Parliamentary Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee - Submission by OPAN

Background – Opportunities Pyrenees, Ararat and Northern Grampians (OPAN)

The Rural City of Ararat and the Shires of Pyrenees and Northern Grampians in the north-west of Victoria have come together to develop solutions to address the existing and future shortage of skilled and unskilled workers across the three municipalities.

The project – Opportunities Pyrenees, Ararat and Northern Grampians (OPAN) is focusing on four interrelated aspects:

- Workforce Planning
- Housing Demand
- Transport Services
- Migration Opportunities.

The major towns in the three LGAs are Avoca and Beaufort (Pyrenees), Ararat and Lake Bolac (Ararat) and Stawell, St Arnaud and Halls Gap (Northern Grampians).

The project commenced in 2019 with funding from Regional Development Victoria (RDV) and in-kind support from all three LGAs. In March 2020, due to COVID 19 management strategies, work on OPAN was put on hold and re-commenced in December 2020.

Our work

Workforce planning, housing and migration

OPAN has commissioned two specific projects: analysing the workforce of the three LGAs in the context of proposed local business expansion and transformational projects and analysing the current and future housing capacity and demand. This is in recognition that the current housing supply is inadequate to meet the demand for workers to fill the existing and projected vacancies.

For our communities and local economies to grow and thrive, there is a need to grow the populations of all three LGAs. This can only be achieved through net migration into the region. Consequently, OPAN is also looking at several options to attract workers to live in our communities with a particular focus on migrants.

Transport Services

Following an initial assessment of the transport services across the region, OPAN is now commissioning a project to improve freight routes and access to public transport across the three LGAs.

Transport Disadvantages across the three LGAs

OPAN has identified several issues which directly or indirectly contribute to transport disadvantage for particular cohorts across our communities. These relate to access to employment, education, essential services to support health and wellbeing and individuals' ability to undertake day-to-day activities across the community.

Access to employment

1. *Significant gaps in public transport:* several of the migrant workers that we have been seeking to attract do not own a vehicle. This means that they are reliant on public transport to get to work. However, there are significant gaps in the existing public transport services. These include:
 - inadequate timetabling, which means that workers cannot get to their shifts on time
 - no transport routes to the towns/areas where the major employers are located
 - insufficient number and coordination of services, meaning that workers are restricted in making links with connecting services, such as catching a bus to meet a train.
2. *Public transport routes:* the availability of public transport between and within smaller towns generally is not available. Where public transport is available in the larger towns, this is infrequent, timetabled at times that do not align with work shifts and often limited to weekdays. This has a particular impact on tourism businesses which experience significant increase in business activity on weekends and significant staff shortages, due to lack of transport access.
3. *Social impact - isolation of family members:* for the families who do have a private vehicle, there is often only one vehicle per household. This means that the carers of children, usually women, are isolated at home during the work shifts. In communities with limited public transport, this isolation is exacerbated. This can be a significant factor for people in deciding whether or to not move to the area.
4. *Constraints on working arrangements:* where there is only one private vehicle, the working household members need to coordinate their shifts with one another to facilitate commuting to work. This can place extreme stress on families, who may need to coordinate school times, childcare, children's activities and manage different workplaces and times.
5. *Costs:* the cost of maintaining one or two private vehicles to access employment can be very high, particularly for individuals who are working in poorly paid positions.

Access to school and education

The school bus routes are designed on State school enrolments and the place of residence of these students, rather than all education enrolments. This means that local Catholic education students cannot use the school bus unless they live close to neighbours whose children are enrolled in a Government school. As routes are determined by where children live, the routes also change when children move. This means that families living in rural areas are vulnerable to transport changes each year. While the current approach to the design of routes potentially provides for flexibility, it also results in uncertainty for families and limited access to school for children whose families have chosen to send their children to a local Catholic school.

An example

Two families live opposite each other 20kms out of St Arnaud with six and three children in their households, respectively. Of the total nine children, seven children are enrolled in a Catholic school in St Arnaud. Each morning, both families were travelling 10kms by car to reach the local school bus which stopped at the point of the State school enrolment. The two families balanced their smaller children/babies to leave the house by 7am each morning to get their children to the 'local' bus 10km away.

Recently, the bus route has changed as three new State enrolled children moved to a farming household closer to the other families. The bus now stops 3kms from their houses, still requiring a car trip each morning and afternoon to reach the 'local' bus. The Department of Education and Training (DET) have advised the additional 3kms will never be added to their daily bus route to reach these children, as their households fall into a different 'education zone', *i.e.*, Catholic not Government school zone. The DET has suggested that these families should be sending their children to the local Government rural school as this would mean that the children would be eligible for the school bus pick-up. Unfortunately, this school is located the same distance from their home as St Arnaud - 10 kms away which would not result in an increase in access to the school bus service.

Access to essential services to support health and wellbeing

The limited public transport means that people in the community are reliant on alternative forms of transport, such as community transport, to access essential services to support their health and wellbeing. This includes attending health service appointments and activities to promote physical and mental wellbeing.

There is little or no programmatic, ongoing funding available for community transport. Local Government frequently fills this gap through rates-based funding. For small rural councils with high demand for various essential community services, it can be difficult to find these resources.

In some communities, this service is provided by small, not-for-profit organisations. Some of these organisations have received grants to purchase and operate their vehicles while others have relied on the generosity of local groups, such as the Lions Club, to raise the funds for these. Local Government also often subsidises these services through the Community Grants scheme.

Importantly, community transport is reliant on volunteers to drive their own vehicles or small community buses. It is often difficult to source volunteers for this task in an ageing community. It can also be a particularly demanding task, as individuals requiring transport are often frail and require assistance to get in and out of a vehicle. These volunteers also require support, which again, is frequently funded and/or provided from council resources.

An example

The greatest demand for community transport is for residents seeking transport to access essential medical services in Maryborough, Ballarat or Horsham, often involving a half a day turnaround which is a big commitment for volunteers.

This also highlights the disadvantage experienced by rural communities in accessing medical services. This impacts directly on morbidity and mortality rates in the community. This is exemplified by a previous study by Deakin University in Pyrenees Shire which highlighted a higher cancer rate in the municipality when compared with regional and metropolitan communities, due to lack of access to literacy.¹

Undertaking day-to-day activities across the community

Without a private vehicle, residents living outside of the major towns in the three municipalities are dependent on friends and neighbours to access supplies and connect with their communities.

This issue has been further exacerbated by recent changes to routes. Some smaller communities, such as the township of Redbank, no longer have any V/line passenger bus service stopping in their town, further isolating residents who relied on such services for many years.

¹ Dodson, S., Osborne, R.H., Beauchamp, A., Batterham, R., Livingston, P., Wildey, C., McPhee, C., Fulton, A., Waycott, L., O'Hara, J. & Hawkins, M. (2016). *Ophelia Grampians – Optimising Health Literacy and Access to Cancer Care in the Grampians – Final Report*, Deakin University, [2016 Ophelia Grampians Report \(slideshare.net\)](https://www.slideshare.net/DeakinUniversity/Ophelia-Grampians-Report)

An example

The management strategies implemented to contain the spread of COVID-19 during 2020 impacted significantly on individuals living in the rural areas of our municipalities. Neighbours and friends were limited in their capacity to support more isolated individuals.

Many of these individuals and families lived on the school bus routes. These buses continued to operate throughout the lockdown period but given the restrictions of their operations, were unable to be used as flexible transport in this urgent situation.

Potential options

The key gap in the public transport service has been identified as an early morning option to transport commuters from Ballarat to Ararat by around 6.20am, to enable workers to get to their worksites and be ready to commence work by 7am. OPAN has identified several options to address the existing gaps, to facilitate improved mobility for all members of the community, including improving access to employment. These include:

- *A V/line Regional Coach or Regional Train Service:* it is proposed to use this service to connect with a bus service from Ararat Railway Station. The Department of Transport has informed OPAN that this required additional resources.
- *Commercial Passenger Vehicles Victoria Registration – Carpooling:* this option requires individual workers to register to deliver commercial services to carpool passengers for a fee. Employers have expressed concern about the reliability of this service, as commuting to work for several employees is dependent on one or two individual drivers. However, costs can be reduced due to sharing between workers for petrol.
- *Commercial Passenger Vehicles Victoria Registration - Charitable Organisations:* this option has some benefits for cost-recovery for the organisations. However, many not-for-profit organisations in the region depend on one or two volunteers to drive what is often small and frequently used buses. This raises concerns about reliability of the service in cases of drivers being unwell, or the bus breaking down or requiring maintenance.
- *Employer-funded Daily Chartered Bus:* several employers are considering this. Employees would need to contribute to the travel costs, as they would for public transport. Initial exploration of the cost of this option indicates that this maybe too expensive to be viable.
- *Program funding for community transport:* access to viable community transport is often assumed to be available across communities. However, there is no reliable and sustainable program funding for community transport, despite often being the most flexible and affordable option for older, frail residents and people living with disability.

Use of School Buses for commuters

OPAN has identified the option of using the school bus service to connect the Ararat Railway Station to various employment locations. The timetabling of this may be possible, as all workers would need to be at their place of employment by 7.30am. This could potentially mean that these buses would then be available for students. The buses could also be used at the end of the shift, as the school day is shorter than the working shifts. These buses could also be used for public commuters across the region at other times during the day.

Other issues

Other issues identified requiring further investigation include:

- Safety issues for students should employees be using the buses at the same time
- The cost of overtime payments for drivers working outside of their current core hours and potentially commencing work before 6.00am
- Strategies for ensuring that students are a priority
- Providing equality of access to school buses for all students, regardless of whether they attend private or public schools
- Capacity of the buses if they are used for both students and the general public at the same time.

A work in progress

OPAN is continuing to investigate the most viable options to support the daily commute of workers to local employment. A project to explore these in more detail has commenced, reporting by the end of August 2021. The use of local school buses is an important aspect of this work.

We look forward to engaging with the Victorian Parliamentary Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee regarding the recommendations of this important Inquiry and anticipate that the work of the Committee will inform our own work in this area. We are keen to hear the advice and recommendations in relation to safety of students and the extent to which the Victorian Government can facilitate the use of school buses to increase access to all students and employment and services for people living in rural and regional Victoria.

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