

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 27 July 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Ms Teresa Jayet, Chief Executive Officer, Mallee Family Care.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones are switched to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Rodney Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Tim Quilty and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will be ultimately made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions from the committee. Could you please begin by stating your name for Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Teresa.

Ms JAYET: Good morning. Thank you, Chair. My name is Teresa Jayet. I am the CEO of Mallee Family Care, located in the Mallee region of Victoria. Before I do begin, I would like to say I do have background noise. Unfortunately for me today the timing is not great, with construction work beginning directly across the road from where I currently am, so I apologise in advance for any background noise.

I wish to first acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we each work and live, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First People. They have never ceded sovereignty and remain strong in their enduring connection to the land, water and culture.

Mallee Family Care, for those who are unaware, is a not-for-profit community service organisation. It was founded in 1979 to support thousands of vulnerable community members in regional, rural and remote areas of north-west Victoria and south-west New South Wales. Our catchment includes, for the purpose of this inquiry, Mildura Rural City Council, Swan Hill Rural City Council, the Buloke shire and the Gannawarra shire. Our organisation delivers more than 60 commonwealth, state and federally funded programs, which include but are not limited to mental health, child and family services, out-of-home care, financial counselling, early years programs, a community legal service and homelessness services, and we are a provider of the NDIS. Mallee Family Care's multidisciplinary approach is our point of difference. We offer wraparound services aimed at early intervention and prevention, and our programs are evidence based and proven to assist those who find themselves in exceptional need, disadvantage or vulnerability.

Our work is integral to the social fabric across all of our communities. In submitting to this inquiry, our intent was as follows: to support the premise that public transport services in rural and regional Victoria are inadequate and do not foster equity and accessibility for all Victorians; to highlight disadvantage in our catchment and the importance of secure, regionally appropriate transport options in providing pathways to education, employment, health and wellbeing and social inclusion opportunities for the most vulnerable in our communities; to raise the importance of place-based policy in infrastructure and service provision in regional and rural areas, as a service plan that may be entirely adequate and appropriate in Swan Hill may very well fall short for those in and around the Underbool region, for example; and to encourage government to be more aspirational when addressing transport services in rural and regional Victoria through community engagement

that identifies existing options and current and future needs and allows for creative approaches in devising solutions.

Meaningful engagement with our communities is always going to be the key to any success. Creative road-based solutions, such as on-demand services that have been trialled in other regional areas across Australia, would provide opportunities for the connectivity and social inclusion that are currently and disappointingly lacking in north-west Victoria. Such a model would also address the potential for further growth of regional Victoria, which would also align with the Victorian government's regional statement.

COVID-19 has brought home the importance of the regions in being able to operate independently of and in support of its metropolitan counterparts, and ensuring viable, flexible and practical public transport is a critical part of the futureproofing of north-west Victoria. People who choose to live in regional and rural areas do so for a range of reasons, and they also accept that at times there are compromises to be made. However, there are some very basic services that everyone should be able to access regardless of where they live, and public transport is at the centre of this discussion. I thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Teresa, for that submission and opening statement and for keeping them brief. That will allow plenty of time for questions. I might start by just going around the committee and giving everyone a couple of questions to start off with. If time allows, we will have additional questions. I might start off with Mr Barton, then Mr Tarlamis. Mr Barton, would you like to go first?

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Teresa, for that. First of all, I would just like to open up a little bit about ourselves so you know a bit about us. On this committee here we have got a member from Northern Victoria, Mr Mark Gepp. We have got another member for Northern Victoria, Mr Tim Quilty, and we have got Mrs Beverly MacArthur from Western Victoria. My background is that I lived and had a farm in central Victoria for many years as well, so we are not naive to the needs and the difficulties for public transport in rural and regional Victoria. In your submission you were very concerned about safety. Could you just tell the committee your concerns, and then perhaps we can address those?

Ms JAYET: Absolutely. Thank you, Mr Barton. When I look at the premise of Mallee Family Care and the community that it serves, across the Mallee catchment we have been working in an environment in relation to a high proportion of people that reach the top five levels of social indicators, and those social indicators, as benchmarked across the state, relate to social disadvantage and inequity. Alongside that, it also includes protection of children, and Mallee Family Care is in the business of protecting children. Our concern has been, and this has been the feedback from our consultations in writing the submission, that many parents have a fear—it is a genuine fear, and some of it is a very real, known fear—that to incorporate school bus systems with public transport systems does raise the anxieties of safety for their children. We also live in a very highly regulated environment in order to deliver social services, and education is also becoming part of that environment. That means bus drivers have to have probity in order to transport children on school buses. It also means anyone working closely with children, and it can be a ripple effect of working with children, not just necessarily directly. Who is going to monitor the safety provisions of those children when we incorporate public transport? I do not know how you mitigate or minimise fear for parents and community when you amalgamate those two modes of transportation.

Mr BARTON: Okay. I think a lot of the fears are genuine, there is no doubt about that, but right here this morning not hundreds, not thousands, but tens of thousands of students jumped on the public transport system around Victoria—and around the country—and mixed with the rest of the community going to and from school. What is being proposed here, and this is only my view, not the committee's view, is that there is an opportunity to increase—because you have highlighted the disadvantage for people living in rural and regional Victoria. But there are ways we can deal with people jumping on these buses. There is prebooking for one—that is one of the things—and cameras. I have got some evidence put before me about children being assaulted, and it is something like 97 per cent is by someone they know. And it is no different if a kid is getting off a bus or a train in Glen Iris and someone follows them through a park on their way home—these are some of the concerns people have raised. Have you got any other views as to how you would improve that safety?

Ms JAYET: The view I have, Mr Barton, is the issue of inequity to use public transport, full stop. When you compare Glen Iris or metropolitan services, you have access and equity to public transport. When you are looking at a community in regional areas, especially farming areas across our Mallee community, there is no

access, full stop. The other part to that, with school buses many of those transport children for 90 minutes each way—from home to school and return. Some of those children live on very remote properties. So whose responsibility would it be, in order for it to be opened up to public transport, to monitor the safety and wellbeing of the children getting off the bus to very remote areas where they then walk some distance to their properties? I think that is part of the concern. I take on board your commentary about the incidence of violence in relation to children. I do not know what data you are quoting there, but it is quite high within the Mallee community already.

Mr BARTON: Do you accept that kids are jumping off school buses and walking great distances to their homes, off public transport buses, now?

Ms JAYET: Given they are available. They are very minimal. Most of them are chartered buses that do that, not part of the Victorian government infrastructure.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. I might go to Mr Tarlamis, then Mrs Beverley McArthur, then Mr Quilty, then Mr Gepp, and then I might have a question myself—so in that order. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Jayet, for your presentation and submission. In your recommendations you clearly state, and in your contribution just now, that you do not support expanding the school buses during school runs. But do you have a view about utilising the school buses outside of the school runs, so during the day?

Ms JAYET: Yes. Great question. It is a conversation we have actually had with our community members and also the parents that are engaged with our service delivery provision. I think if there was an opportunity to open up school bus systems to the broader community outside of school hours so then it becomes part of the public transport fabric within those remote communities, then I think it is an opportunity that would be welcomed by many of the community members because it gives them further options and choice. I guess what would need to be considered is what would the frequency be, how would that be managed across a seven-day period and what are the time frames within those seven days as well.

Mr TARLAMIS: I guess it may differ between areas, but I would be interested, in terms of the school bus runs: would they naturally kind of align with where the buses would need to go to get people around or would there need to be modifications? I am just conscious that the school runs would be kind of designed around where they would be doing pick-ups for students and stuff but might not necessarily align to where people would need to go to do their shopping or get to health services and things like that. So if you were to modify the runs, it would add time to the trips potentially, which could affect getting kids to and from schools. Obviously if you are going to be designing services outside school hours as well, you would need to factor that in in terms of the middle of the day, and it may be that you could design runs where on certain days they went to certain locations so you could schedule your doctors appointments or shopping or something around those sorts of things. But I do not know how well they align, and it would probably be different in different places.

Ms JAYET: I think you raise a critical point about the direct service provision for children going to school and what the hours look like outside of that and where the high need is. There are some areas within our catchment where there are no school bus lines, they are actually chartered bus systems, so I do not know what that would look like outside of those regions. Speaking earlier about a place-based service approach, that would be really important here because the community is your best voice in being able to ascertain what would work for them. I think that consultation would go a long way to help deliver on something like this, to be honest with you.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Ms Jayet. Is it the case at the moment that you have no transport available to many of your clients?

Ms JAYET: That is correct. At the moment one of the examples which fits current Victorian government policy is this very worthwhile investment in the early years space for children and getting access to education very early for children. Now, that has been a critical piece of work that Mallee Family Care has been delivering on in the northern and southern Mallee. But what we are finding is some of those families have no vehicle to be able to transport their children to the early years environments and there is no public transport system or a bus system to get kids to school that they could also utilise if that was an option. What we have had to deliver is being able to pick up those children from their home to take them to those early years providers so they have access to that education. There are some very small towns and small pockets within our catchment area which have absolutely no access, and that is some of the benchmark we are actually starting from here across the Mallee region. So when we are talking about transport equity, people in some of those regions have absolutely no transport and have no vehicle of their own to be able to do the transportation.

Mrs McARTHUR: So if the bus network was expanded to include more of your catchment area in terms of children going to school, wouldn't it be also feasible that their parents might get access to transport to the services that they require given that they do not have a vehicle to do it? Wouldn't that make sense?

Ms JAYET: To a degree it makes sense, Mrs McArthur, because part of that also has to fit in with timetables, and your scheduling of a bus service for public transportation is regulated by a timetable. That is why our approach was to consider the recommendation of an on-demand service, which is the pilot currently being run nationally, which means you would not have to run a tight schedule for a timetable and people could do bookings around their appointments. The point you raise is a really good one in the sense that people need access to health services, they need access to being able to purchase their groceries or do their business in town once a week, and if there is not a provision for transportation full stop, then that makes it very difficult.

Mrs McARTHUR: So something would be better than nothing, wouldn't it?

Ms JAYET: I do not subscribe to that theory, to be honest with you. If you are going to be really investing in what the actual need is for particular pockets of the community, you need to assess what is going on in that community and what really would work, and part of our assessment has been a timetabled route for bus services may not be the best option, but a consideration might be to invest in an on-demand service, which means that you do not have fixed timetables for people that they have to schedule around in order to meet appointment schedules.

Mrs McARTHUR: Do you manage to get all your clients' children to school now?

Ms JAYET: If we are picking them up, we certainly do. If we do not pick these kids up, then they are not attending. Especially in the Buloke and Gannawarra regions we provide the service. We even provide some services here in Mildura to do that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Having grown up on a farm myself and spent many hours on school buses in primary school, I have some experience there. But when I think about school buses I think about long runs on back country roads from the farms. Are all the bus runs you are talking about here the same, or do we have things going within towns other than Mildura and Swan Hill and so on? I am curious for you to describe what sort of bus runs we have out in your area.

Ms JAYET: Mr Quilty, when we look at the region of Robinvale, which has very limited service and there is a chartered service, so it is not part of the public transport service provision, it is an extraordinarily busy service, and I think there are some areas that you could capitalise on in that particular region, just as there are in Manangatang. Manangatang has absolutely nothing in that community, so it is a community that is highly vulnerable and highly disadvantaged. So when you have got highly populated areas like Mildura, like Swan Hill—the actual CBD area of Swan Hill—you do have the school bus routes and you do have the equity and access. That is okay. The issue is the outlying areas, where there is absolutely nothing like in the areas that I have just described, and that is the part that is problematic here.

Mr QUILTY: Sometimes when I was a kid a parent would ride on a bus to school if for some reason they had to go into town from a farm. I would say it probably happened at least once a week—it was probably unofficially, but I do not know if it was a problem. In small country areas where everyone knows everyone, do you think the risk is so high? Can you comment on that?

Ms JAYET: When you are comparing risk, I think it depends on what you are comparing it to. Those people that are often isolated and living more rurally and more remotely, I would suggest, are more at risk, because we do not have a line of sight on people living in those communities like we do day to day on people living in more populated areas.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. You talked about the on-demand service. Could you expand on how that would actually work in remote areas?

Ms JAYET: Yes. So the on-demand service, as I mentioned earlier, has been trialled nationally. It has been in a pilot phase in New South Wales for a long period of time, and they are expanding some of those pilot services due to the success. If we were to consider an on-demand service here in the Mallee region, what that would mean is essentially a schedule where people booked—and these are not large 25- to 30-seater bus services, they are smaller buses as well, so the type of transport is very different—and there would be a scheduling system the same as what you would do with a taxi or an Uber but it would also transport more people at the same time. And part of that, which I guess is the consideration you are looking at here, is the connectivity with other members within the community. So it has capacity to go to more outlying regions and pick up people directly from their homes and transport them directly to their appointments, which a public transport system does not do, and the efficacy and the efficiency of that is working for community connectedness and social wellbeing in those regions where it has been piloted. What would need to be considered is what would be the financial responsibility and how would that work. Some of the data has not been made available on all of those pilot regions in respect to that as yet.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might pass over to Mr Mark Gepp, who is a fellow Northern Victoria member of Parliament.

Mr GEPP: Hi, Teresa, and thank you so much for your presentation. Also I want to acknowledge the fantastic work that your organisation does right across the Mallee and into New South Wales, and into South Australia as well. You do a lot of heavy lifting on behalf of the community, and you are to be commended for that.

Teresa, I just want to tease out the on-demand services model that you have talked about. I am just trying to reconcile in my head the comments that you made to Mr Barton earlier on, where there is that issue of safety and security, if you like, for people and the concerns expressed there. How in the on-demand services model are we safeguarding people in the more remote communities from that perspective? Indeed you talked about the efficacy of the service. You talked about the qualifications required of the transport drivers. You have identified Manangatang particularly; we know that there is not much by way of any services in Manangatang. So how do we give the community that sense of safety and security in that environment with the on-demand services model?

Ms JAYET: Thank you, Mr Gepp. I think the critical difference when we were looking at the on-demand service was that we were working from the premise that we were not comfortable with, for varying reasons, opening up bus transport systems to public transport systems, and we had children as our highest priority in factoring that in. So that is why we did some research in what other options are available here that we could put on the table for consideration, and the on-demand service was one of those. When we were looking at what does transport actually do, how does it assist people in our community, the on-demand service met the brief that we were considering. So we are looking at connectivity and social inclusion, especially for an older generation, because many of those are outlying communities. There is an older cohort of people living in those communities but a younger cohort starting families in those communities as well. So what that means is bringing a connection between populations for utilising public transport, and we are factoring in that it is an adult service system more so than anything else. It requires a booking, so there is some legitimacy behind being able to check probities. There is also legitimacy about the rigour in checks and balances for quality audit purposes. But it also means that when you are going from one meeting point to another direct meeting point it assists in people feeling safe. It means that they do not have to factor in walking to a particular environment to

get to an appointment. It also means it is more dynamic in its flexibility that is being offered as opposed to public transport, and it is more responsive to community need as well. So when you look at social indicators, health indicators of a community, this is actually quite a viable option to keep people connected to ensure that they are able to meet those appointments as well. So that was our consideration there.

Mr GEPP: Okay. Thank you. And just a quick follow-up: in terms of the resources required, any additional resources required to run the on-demand services, have you gone into that and done some sort of examination of what you think might be required?

Ms JAYET: Yes. So there is a benefit analysis which has been done by the New South Wales government. It is called the 'Benefits of demand-responsive transport in rural areas'. So we were trying to match like for like in this circumstance. So what they spoke about is there was an increase in patronage on these types of services. I mentioned before the financial cost. While those figures were not available, in some areas there was an increase in operational costs overall, but in other areas there was not, as compared to public transport costs. And there were also multiple service users as well. So it increased in patronage across community, which I think only adds value to social cohesion in those smaller remote communities as well.

Mr GEPP: And I guess there is an argument, isn't there, when you look at it? One of the most powerful things I think in your submission was when you provided that table of the percentage of people who live in metropolitan Melbourne and their accessibility to public transport, and you contrast that with somebody—and I think it is about 74 per cent—in Gannawarra, where it is under 10 per cent. You know, the people from Gannawarra would say, 'Well, we are paying taxes, too, for these services and stuff'.

Ms JAYET: That is right, Mr Gepp. That is exactly right. Thank you.

Mr GEPP: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I notice that we are going ahead of schedule, so I would like to actually allow committee members if they have any additional questions, because I know quite a number of them are very invested in this inquiry. Does anybody have any additional questions you would like to ask?

Mr BARTON: Yes, I do.

The CHAIR: Yes, Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Teresa, if we open it up—now, we are not suggesting for a moment that it is going to be suitable for everybody. There are some communities where the bus service, for instance, and the school will go, 'No, don't want to do it'—simple as that, do not want to do it. But so many people have approached me where absolutely people are happy to do it, because the reality is we are going to go—if we opened it up, if the committee recommends it and the government accepts it—from 400 bus routes to 1600 bus routes, that would be an enormous contribution to people who are not being supported by the Victorian government public transport network. I think the advantages—you do not see that being credible; we should be exploring that.

Ms JAYET: So my consideration in relation to that: it certainly is a significant jump in the number of bus services, from 400 to 1600. My question would be more about what lies behind that data. So if we are increasing transport across all of those communities, what is the amount of the scheduling? What does it actually look like? And I think there would have to be some really tight rigour in assessing that data. For me, I am always going by the evidence base. I am always looking to improve the quality of the data. So to state that there would be an increase in bus routes across those communities is a fantastic thing, but what does that mean in real terms? What would the frequency of that be? What would be the timetabling and scheduling of those bus routes as well? They would probably be my questions surrounding that for those particular communities. And would that actually then meet the needs of those people? That consultation is important.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Look, there is no question. Not that I want to pump up the government's tyres too much—there are too many Labor government members here—but the government is doing the biggest review of bus services that we have seen in the last 15 years, and I know there are already trials being done for on-demand buses. I also know it is outrageously—well, I will not say it is outrageously, it is incredibly—expensive trying to do it. I know in New South Wales they have had some success and I also know other parts have been

shut down because of the expense, but that is not a reason not to explore it. So there are good things happening in the bus network, but it is very difficult when we are talking about—

What we have got here is a resource, and I think we could use that resource a little bit better. I suppose that is a comment rather than anything else.

The CHAIR: Yes. I do not think that is a question, Mr Barton. I appreciate that feedback. Do any other committee members have an additional question? In that case, on behalf of the committee, Teresa, I just want to thank you and Mallee Family Care for all the work you do. I really appreciated today's discussion. I found your presentation was very informative and it gave us a good overview of some of the challenges faced by people in your region. So on behalf of the committee, we wish to say thank you. Now the committee will take a short break before our next witness.

Ms JAYET: Thank you, Chair, and I thank everyone for the opportunity for the presentation. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.