

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 25 August 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 Barbara Wise, Executive Director, Transport Partnerships, Regional and Outer Metropolitan, Transport for NSW.

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

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to also introduce my fellow committee members that are present here today: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Mark Gepp and Mr Tim Quilty.

To witnesses appearing, 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 this 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. Ultimately transcripts will be made public and put on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 15 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Barbara.

**Ms WISE:** Thank you so much. My name is Barbara Wise, and I am Executive Director of Transport Partnerships at Transport for NSW. My role encompasses public transport across regional and outer metropolitan areas of New South Wales, and it is fair to say that the majority of the services that we provide cover school students. So in New South Wales, Transport for NSW contracts for services for school buses, unlike what I understand is the case in Victoria, where it is the education department. We do this under the auspices of the school student transport scheme. Our scheme is relatively generous. We will provide free transport to eligible school students, and the eligibility relates generally to walking distance to a school of choice, so it is not limited to a public school or a particular nearest school or any of those things, it is to the student's school of choice. So in that regard we actually in some cases pay for children's flights. Say for students on Lord Howe Island, if they need to get to high school, we will pay for their flights to go to high school in Sydney. And obviously it is across borders too. So we have plenty of New South Wales residents, for example, who attend school on the Victorian side of the border, and we will contract for services to go into Victoria to that end.

Across regional New South Wales—I will focus on that, given that is the focus of the committee—we have about 3000 school buses across more than 600 contracts for school bus services, and we do permit fare-paying passengers to travel on those services, obviously subject to the capacity of the bus, so schoolchildren will always be given priority over any fare-paying passengers. And it is one of the things that I think the committee will need to think about, so I will mention it here: under our current model of contract in regional New South Wales the bus operator keeps the fare revenue, so any decision to actually charge the fare rests with the operator. If it were the other way round and the transport department were to keep the fare revenue, then we would need to think through how we would ensure revenue protection and fare payment and those kinds of things, how you would deal with that in the contract space.

The figures I have in front of me are self-reported data from the operators, so I will put some caveats on that. However, up until September 2019—and I am using those figures, one, because September is when we got struck by terrible bushfires, and we have been obviously impacted by COVID for all of last year and half of this year—it was up to 60 000 trips per month that were being taken by members of the public on school buses, so that is not a small number.

In terms of how it works in practice, we generally leave it up to the operators. Obviously operators have safety management systems that they have to have as part of their accreditation—I imagine your system has similar things in place in Victoria—and really they have to put in place measures around risk management, including child safety and passenger safety. In practice what a lot of drivers will do is ask any fare-paying passengers to sit up front, or sometimes if there are very small children, they will put the small kids up front.

I have been in this role for just over two years, but I have been at Transport and around transport for a lot longer than that, and I have also looked at some of our data history. We have not had any safety issues raised. Again, as part of our safety regime and our accreditation regime we would expect bus operators to report to the regulator any incidents of this kind of nature if there was a stranger danger type situation. Anything involving a schoolchild is automatically required to be reported through the contract and also through our safety regulator, and I am not aware of any incidents at all. I did speak to a longstanding employee who had been with Transport for about 30 years, and she said, ‘About 20 years ago we had one person, and it was someone with mental health issues. They didn’t attack the children, but they were just saying things that made kids feel uncomfortable, and in the end we just stopped providing that person service’. There are facilities in the regulations that permit drivers to refuse entry to people who they think are going to cause a disruption or a safety concern for people, so we had a mechanism for dealing with it. It did not come around very often.

They are probably the main things I would like to point out about school bus services. I notice that your terms of reference talk about transport-disadvantaged communities as well, and I thought it would be worth sharing some of the programs that we have in place for transport-disadvantaged communities in New South Wales. Obviously our state is much larger than Victoria, and we have much larger distances between and many more isolated communities, so there are plenty of places where there is not even a school bus because there is not a school, and we have tended to provide for transport-disadvantaged communities through our community transport program. That is a state government funded program, and it is provided through community transport providers. The bulk of the money for community transport actually comes from the commonwealth, and that is the commonwealth home support program—that is aimed at older people, keeping them in their homes so that they do not need to go into a nursing home—and we kind of put our money on top of that. We actually have the head contract with the commonwealth, and we fund this transport-disadvantaged program as part of that one contract. That way we are getting efficiency out of those vehicles being used for other commonwealth home support program purposes at the same time as being able to provide some service to transport-disadvantaged communities. Again, we find that the same kinds of trips are being taken by transport-disadvantaged communities. It tends to be shopping and medical appointments, jobseeking appointments, those kinds of things, and that is really what commonwealth home support clients are doing as well when they are accessing community transport, so it is a similar need that is being met.

We also have a couple of little grants programs we do—about \$900 000 a year—called transport access regional partnerships programs, and they are aimed at communities with particular needs. Often it will be a one-off: say, for example, getting disadvantaged Aboriginal communities together—so, children—to participate in a school holiday program or something like that. So we have a few different programs aimed at transport-disadvantaged communities.

The other thing I will say: we do have in Transport for NSW, as you will see in Future Transport 2056, this notion we cannot separate, and I am sure the Victorians have the same notion. Regional communities really do face a much greater level of transport disadvantage than our city counterparts. We do have tools such as models like the public transport accessibility level. It is a model where we can measure a community’s access to public transport. It can include things like walkability of the surrounding areas, what the infrastructure for public transport is like, frequency of service, those kinds of things, and you can look at levels of advantage or disadvantage of that community by using that tool. You can use that for planning purposes—seeing where you can inject things. We have chosen to take a focus, through our strategic documents, around a day return service from smaller communities into larger centres. That has been the Future Transport 2056 focus, and they are some of the things that we have been implementing over time.

I will just kind of pivot back around to the school buses for a second, just because I have seen that there have been, in some of the submissions that you have received, questions about whether school buses, being idle in the day, can be used for other purposes. Obviously it is possible, but there are some things that are a bit of a barrier around some of that. School services are exempt currently from the disability standards for accessible public transport, meaning those vehicles do not have to be accessible, and because they do not, most of them

are not. That is at least the case in New South Wales. That means if we were to schedule a school bus to run regular route services or more broadly during the day we would be open to a discrimination claim from someone with a disability if we were not running an accessible bus. So there are considerations there. We have just released, in fact yesterday, a zero-emission buses strategy, so we are looking at: if we are going to renew the fleet, can we use that to get some better accessibility outcomes as well? So that is one of the things to consider—the accessibility of the fleet.

Obviously, on top of that, once you have got the bus, the biggest expenses are the driver's wage and the fuel. It is nice to be able to say it, but you have got to have the budget in order to provide the service, which is why we have kind of gone with community transport, because those trips are already being taken by other people and there is capacity there. There is no shortage of vehicles anywhere, I would suggest, across Australia; it is how they are being used. They are probably the main points that I think are worth covering.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Barbara. That was very informative. Just the headline to committee members: I found it, like I said, very helpful that the transport department handles the program more broadly, that students get to go to their school of choice, that fare-paying passengers are permitted under the current model but that is up to driver or contractor discretion and they keep the revenues. You did state that there had been one incident in your 20 years in this transport space that you have heard of or know of. It is interesting information. I am just summarising a bit of that because I think that is going to trigger a lot of questions for the committee—very relevant—on some of the broader issues in this space. I might actually pass on to committee members to ask some questions, because I can see them all thinking away. I might start off with Mr Barton and then Mr Tarlamis. Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Afternoon, Barbara. Thanks for coming and having a chat with us today. Did I understand correctly that New South Wales has free transport for all students?

**Ms WISE:** You have to meet eligibility requirements under the School Student Transport Scheme, but even if you are not eligible for that free travel there are school term passes which are a nominal cost, say \$50 a term. It is very low in price. But for most children it is free if you are eligible under the scheme.

**Mr BARTON:** Would that be means tested, I assume?

**Ms WISE:** No. There is no means testing, and there is no co-payment. Generally speaking, it is based on walking distance to the school that you attend. If you are a very young child, so kinder to year 2, there is no walking distance limitation. Any child who is that young is eligible. And then the distances get larger the older the child is so there is another cut-off point at high school; it is a slightly longer walking distance. Obviously medical conditions are taken into account as well. So yes, those walking distances do not necessarily apply, depending on certain circumstances. It accommodates joint custody arrangements. There are all kinds of things, you know. Most of the complexities have been worked through over time.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, that is fantastic. Just one thing about people who are able to go in the bus. In my mind I would be suggesting, because it is a school bus, people should really have to prebook in a perfect world. How does New South Wales do it? Can people stand at a bus stop?

**Ms WISE:** Yes.

**Mr BARTON:** So you can have a random people jumping on?

**Ms WISE:** Yes. Generally speaking, though, in a lot of the smaller communities people are mostly known to each other anyway. So it is not like there are a lot of complete strangers, especially in the smaller communities. It does not occur as much in our larger regional centres. So if you were thinking about Newcastle or some of those more urban, outer urban areas of New South Wales, generally speaking they are all mixed on regular public transport anyway, so it is much different. Just because it is not a school bus does not mean there are not a whole bunch of school kids and adults on the same service.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Barbara. Touching on that safety issue, I was just wondering, with your buses and school buses, are they fitted with cameras or is there a requirement for cameras?

**Ms WISE:** Some of our older fleet would not have security cameras, but over time as we have upgraded the specifications of school buses, yes. And certainly you cannot buy a new school bus now without it having cameras, so more and more over time—I do not actually have the figures in front of me. I would be happy to provide to the committee later what the proportion at the moment of cameras is. And the other thing that we are rolling out now is some technology that we call the transport connected bus, but really it is vehicle tracking technology. It has, obviously, benefits for us and the operators, but also from a customer point of view you can see where the bus is and you can see if it is full. So if you were in a more remote area—because they only come twice a day, right—and hoping to get onto a school bus, if it were full you could see, ‘Well, I’m not going to be able to get on that bus today’.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Okay. All right, thank you. Those are all the questions I have at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Tarlamis. Mr Gepp, then Mr Quilty.

**Mr GEPP:** Thanks, Barbara. I wonder, in terms of your public transport accessibility model, if we could get some more information on that. That sounds an interesting way of measuring a whole range of different issues, so any further information we could get on that would be—

**Ms WISE:** Sorry, on accessible public transport?

**Mr GEPP:** Yes, you were talking about how you have got a model—

**Ms WISE:** Oh, the PTAL. Absolutely. I, again, would be happy to send through some written documentation for the committee. But yes, it is a model with a bunch of inputs, and you overlay demographic information. So we do have a definition of ‘transport disadvantage’ that is in our contract with community transport providers—so typically that can be Aboriginality, older people, people with disability. So if you overlay that demographic information with the PTAL model, then you get a good sense of where those people are and where you can target service provision. So yes, it looks at all kinds of things. I would be happy to send something through to the committee, if that is helpful.

**Mr GEPP:** That would be great. Yes, please. That would be fantastic. I just want to tease out this issue of child safety, and obviously that has been an enormous area of feedback that we have received throughout the inquiry. I note what you have said about the incidents or lack thereof, but I imagine it is a theme that will probably come up still from time to time. When you started to move towards this system, how did you respond to those concerns that obviously come from communities, and parents in particular, about making sure that the kids, in whatever environment it is, particularly in the more remote places in the state, are a priority over everything else?

**Ms WISE:** Yes, it is one of those things that sort of arose organically over decades. It is almost as long as we have been providing school transport that people have been doing it. Because it came from that student entitlement system, where we provided transport to so many different kids on such a large scale, there have always been a strong number of operators who are embedded in their communities who have been providing these services, and they had a lot of ownership over their services and the revenue was theirs and all of those things. So they were making calls about it long before government kind of intervened, if you know what I mean. So we had a different starting point from you. Something like putting in the cameras was an obvious one, where we felt, regardless of whether it is a school bus or any other kind of bus for that matter, it is a good idea to have them. Asking the person to just sit at the front of the bus is something that has been done in response to parent concern. We do occasionally get feedback from parents who are concerned, but not very often, and as I said, the smaller the community, generally speaking, it is more likely that the person using the service is going to be known to other members of the community as well. If you think about the fact that it is a once-a-day trip in and out of a location, generally speaking there are limited purposes for which anyone else would want to use it, so it really is a safety-net type of arrangement.

Most of our fare-paying passengers in regional New South Wales tend to be on a pension of some kind, so they tend to have concession fares. It is not used a lot, although a fair number of, I think, apprentices and things,

because of the time of day, will use it. But they are much more likely to be concession fare users, because most other people drive, right?

**Mr GEPP:** Yes, that is right. Chair, if I might, just one more quick one. I guess, Barbara, if you had your druthers and you could snap your fingers and change one thing about the current system or pinpoint one area that we should, you know, really pay major attention to if we were to make this sort of quantum leap, what would it be?

**Ms WISE:** The key things for you to think about will be just how integrated you want to go and issues around accessibility obligations under disability standards would be something I think is important, especially if you are wanting to use those vehicles for other services outside of school times. And again, while the current standards, if they were to be imposed on school buses, would mean that every school bus needed to have, depending on the size, two wheelchair spots and a whole bunch of other things, while that is not the case and it may not be that every school bus needs to be accessible, I would have thought that you would want to proactively make some accessible, not only for members of the public but for children in a wheelchair. Our disability transport for schoolkids is an entirely separate program, and it is actually run by our education department, as I imagine it is in Victoria as well.

**Mr GEPP:** Thank you.

**Ms WISE:** No problem.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Quilty.

**Mr QUILTY:** Thank you, Chair. It is always hard coming last because a lot of the questions have been asked already. Plus, your initial presentation was very informative—really very good, I thought. With the capacity of buses, we have heard earlier today that in Victoria the Department of Transport dictates capacity sizes and amalgamates routes depending on numbers available. So is it left up to bus drivers what size buses they can run to put capacity on and so on?

**Ms WISE:** That is a very good question. So we too under our contracts will work with the operators to make sure the appropriately sized bus is in service. We have a panel of different categories of bus that operators can choose from and that goes to the current model: the operator buys the bus and we then fund through the contract for that bus, but we have a few different categories of bus, right from a very small 12-seater through to a bendy bus or a double-decker or whatever. So, no, it is not just left entirely up to the operator to make that decision. We work with them, looking at the student numbers on their service, on what would be the appropriate size of vehicle for them to use. And also you cannot do it in isolation. Because we do not have rivers of money the default position is not always to buy a new bus. It is: are there other services in the area where extra capacity is available that might be able to meet a growth need? So we always start from a position of what do we have already out there before we then go and invest in a new vehicle.

**Mr QUILTY:** Okay. Thanks. Now, the Transport Connected Bus program has an app thing that can track who is on the buses. Has that led to an increase in people riding or not?

**Ms WISE:** Well, unfortunately it has only been rolled out over the last year or so, and we have been impacted everywhere, as everywhere has, by COVID, so it is a bit hard to say how that has gone at the moment, to be perfectly honest. But I am hoping that post COVID, once we have got it on in more towns and cities, it will be much more widely used by the community. I know, for example, that the bus operators get a lot out of the data that they can get out of the system as well. So there are a lot of reasons why you would want something like this. Obviously a customer benefit is one, but there are a number of reasons to put this kind of technology on. It helps us even on that bus size question, if you know what I mean.

**Mr QUILTY:** Is there capacity to pre-book at all, using it?

**Ms WISE:** At the moment it is not set up to integrate fair payment or any of those things. I understand that with the technology we have procured you can plug that kind of thing in, but we are not set up to do that at this point in time. There are a number of platforms. We run a number of different on-demand services through regional New South Wales, and there are booking apps for those as well. I would say that a learning we have had from our on-demand pilot programs is that particularly in regional areas it is a slow burn to encourage

booking, particularly when you think about who is more likely to use public transport—that is, people with no access to a car or older people. They are much less native users of booking apps for things, and phone booking is definitely a strong feature that we have seen in some of our bookable public transport services. But it does not mean that it is not worth it, because it is a quarter to a third; it will build up over time. It is definitely something worth investigating, it is just not—I would not recommend it as the only method of being able to book.

**Mr QUILTY:** Very good. And do you plan to roll it out across the whole state over time?

**Ms WISE:** Yes, that is the intention. Obviously, we have got funding approved for certain amounts at the moment, but I am hoping that we will get it everywhere across regional New South Wales.

**Mr QUILTY:** Can you give us an estimate of what it would cost to implement something like that?

**Ms WISE:** I probably cannot, given the commercial-in-confidence nature of the contract that is in place, and in fact I am not the contract holder; it is the technology team that has it. I am sorry, I am not sure that I can provide you anything around that. I will see what I can—

**Mr QUILTY:** Do you think it is something with a capacity where we could just pick up what you have and add it to Victoria or even combine it?

**Ms WISE:** Actually, we have already started talking to the Victorian transport department. They have been looking at the same technology as we have been using. It is not only for the customer benefits but even just to have an accurate understanding of where your bus stops are and your routes and all of that type of thing. Our internal tech team developed an app that they were using to plot the bus routes and the bus stops in order to feed into this system, and we have given a copy of that app to the Victorian transport department so that they can have a play around and see what it can do for them. So I think they are already looking at it.

**Mr QUILTY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that, and I must also thank you, Barbara. That was very informative and answered a lot of the questions that I had coming into today. But I do have one question, and that is about the bus routes. Are they modified annually or is it more regularly, taking notice of the fact that everyone has an entitlement? And how is that done?

**Ms WISE:** Yes. The beginning of the school year is always a busy time for us. Obviously every year kids start school, kids change schools and people move house. So particularly at the start of the school year it is a very interesting run. Schools change their bell times; that also influences how the services operate—if one bus is off servicing several schools. So it is certainly dynamic at the beginning of the school year. The biggest task happens at the start of the school year. We will get the enrolment information, or the operators will get enrolment information from schools, and then it gets fed into our school system, where the kids are encouraged to apply for their bus passes so we can get a sense of where people are going to and from, and then the start of the school year is the biggest task. But it does occur at different points in the school year as well, where you need to make tweaks and changes as different communities grow and change, particularly as a new school opens. There are all kinds of things that can influence it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. That was the one outstanding question I had. A lot of the others were obviously asked. As Mr Quilty alluded to, being one of the last people to ask questions, most of the information is usually teased out by this stage. But I will go around to committee members, seeing as we do have a little bit more time allocated, if they wish to do so, to ask an additional question. Does anyone have an additional question? Yes, Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Barbara, just when the school is not sitting—school holidays, weekends—what are your buses doing then?

**Ms WISE:** Well, we are not using them for anything, mostly—the school buses anyway—so there is no contracted service. Bus operators sometimes do use the fleet for charters or for their other work; that is not prohibited under our contract. In a lot of the more remote areas, because it is a 200-day-a-year job and it is only for a couple of hours in the morning and a couple of hours in the afternoon, it is actually often the second job of, say, a [Zoom dropout]—

**Mr BARTON:** There are certainly a few farmers doing it.

**Ms WISE:** Absolutely. They might have gotten up at 4 and done whatever on the farm and then gotten on the bus. It is not like it is their first business, so they are not interested in school holidays and doing anything with the bus. They are quite happy for it to sit there.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. I guess the challenge is if we open it up and start doing the school runs and then Granny wants to do a doctor's appointment and things like that and then all of a sudden school holidays come, then all of a sudden it is not there.

**Ms WISE:** Yes. I mean, that would come down to the contract that you have in place and then what obligations you put in place under that contract arrangement.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. Thank you, Barbara. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that, Mr Barton. Mr Gepp has an additional question. Mr Gepp.

**Mr GEPP:** Barbara, in terms of your 3000-bus fleet—and I know it is all contracted—do you have any sense of how many of those would be accessibility compliant?

**Ms WISE:** The number I gave you earlier was just the dedicated school buses. Across regional and outer metropolitan it is actually closer to 4100, but of just those regions outside the Newcastle- and Wollongong-type urban areas we have 3300-ish buses under our rural and regional bus service contract, and between 300 and 400 of those would be accessible. They are the ones that provide the route services in towns, so the town service running around Orange or Coffs Harbour. They also do provide school services. Do not get me wrong: the timetabled services at 8.15 in the morning will be carrying an awful lot of school kids around town centres.

**Mr GEPP:** Of the 60 000 trips a month of non-student travel, do you have any idea of the aggregated revenue associated with that number each year?

**Ms WISE:** I do not have it in front of me, but I could probably get a hold of it. As I said, at the moment it is kept by the operator, and they do report that to us. I am happy to provide it to the committee.

**Mr GEPP:** I am sure they report it for tax purposes, too.

**Ms WISE:** I had better make sure I am not breaching any confidentiality before I say that, but if I can, I will hand it over, for sure.

**Mr GEPP:** Sure. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Barbara, I might just have one additional issue to tease out because it just came up when we were talking about disability access. It is not necessarily in line with our terms of reference here, but what happens to other children with disability? Do they get a taxi service or some other service provided by the state, or subsidised?

**Ms WISE:** Yes. Most states have an equivalent program. It kind of depends how the state has decided to participate in the NDIS, but I think a lot of states have decided it is an in-kind contribution to the NDIS, and generally speaking it is run out of education departments. They contract with taxi operators, with bus companies, with all kinds of different providers. It is not all about wheelchair accessibility. Sometimes a child with a disability cannot use public transport because of difficult behaviours or for all kinds of different reasons. So it is not necessarily about wheelchair accessibility; it is all kinds of things.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that, Barbara. I know you are really bringing a wealth of knowledge to this committee, and a lot of the information you have provided will be very helpful in our deliberations moving forward. On behalf of the committee, I wish to say thank you for presenting before us today. You were very engaging and very helpful, so thank you again.

**Witness withdrew.**