

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 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*)

Mr Paul Velten, Chief Information and Infrastructure Officer, Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd.

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 off and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging 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. I am Chair of the committee, and I would like to acknowledge my fellow committee members that are present here today: Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Rod Barton, Mrs Beverley McArthur and Mr Tim Quilty.

To witnesses giving evidence: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and is further subject to 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 transcript following the hearing. Ultimately, transcripts will be made public on the committee website.

We welcome your opening comments, but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 to 15 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions with the committee. I will hand over to you, Paul, so if you could begin by stating your name for the benefit of Hansard and then start the presentation.

Mr VELTEN: Thank you. My name is Paul Velten, and I am the Chief Information and Infrastructure Officer for the Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd. The submission we have provided is on behalf of the regional Catholic dioceses of Victoria, more specifically the entities being Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Ltd, Catholic Education Sandhurst Ltd and Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd. And again, thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

I will just quickly provide an introduction and overview of the submission that we have already provided. In relation to the area of disadvantage experienced, we have made notes generally and we have also provided some more specific experiences and concerns of particular schools. If I can just quickly summarise, some students within our Catholic schools have no access to the current school bus service because of eligibility requirements. Access by Catholic students can be dependent upon capacity and eligibility. We have some students that are unable to travel on the school bus program due to this capacity issue. There can be students that miss out on a seat on a bus. In fact it can be a situation where it is one child from a family who is eligible but another is not. It may also be that there is no accessible bus route for our students.

The example noted in the submission we provided was St Mary's Primary School, Inglewood, where the bus service ceased. Another example, a new school we referenced, is St Anne's, Kialla; the school has never been added to the town bus network, as it concludes at the government school. The bus company has kindly continued this on, but as a growing school, this will become an issue in the coming time.

Where a Catholic student is unable to access the school bus program, this can result in private bus arrangements being added by the school, which is a cost to the school and parents. We have instances also where students use the public transport system. In some instances, there have been problems encountered, and I reference you to what we have advised in relation to St Augustine's College, Kyabram, in our submission.

I also note that when there is a student-free day for a government school, the buses do not always operate, and Catholic students' parents will then need to find alternative means to get their students to school. The example that we quoted was in the Horsham-Camperdown region. This is not unique, though, to this region. Eligibility and accessibility for non-government students should be equal to that of government school students, and we need to address where there are capacity and access issues for all.

We also raised through our submission concerns with respect to opening up the bus network to the general public, and we do raise our concern with respect to child safety. I also wish to add to that in relation to where the bus stops are. Child safety is not just time on the bus. Some of the bus stops for pick-up and drop-off are actually quite isolated settings. Again, this may expose students to potential risks, and it needs to be a consideration.

As a summary: we do value a dedicated school bus service. We believe there needs to be further consideration as to how the current bus system can be improved to cater for all students—and not based on the current eligibility criteria—with sufficient, and where needed increased, capacity. As mentioned before, we are concerned, from a child safety perspective, were the system to be opened to the general public. They are my opening comments, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Paul—an interesting outline of the issues. I was not across that issue facing your region, Kialla, Kyabram and Camperdown specifically, which you raised. I might go around to committee members to ask questions. I might maybe start with one of your MPs in western Victoria, Mrs Beverley McArthur, if she has a question, then Mr Barton, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis. Everyone could ask a couple of questions, and if we get time we will go around and give committee members another opportunity.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Paul. The school bus network has been a good thing, but it is an historic creature, where sometimes the routes do not seem to change no matter what. But they should, and the buses should be used for all sorts of purposes. How do you think we should go about making sure that every child going to a school should be able to get on one of these school buses but where there is space we could allow those people in the community who do not have access to any other form of public transport to use them?

Mr VELTEN: Yes, I guess there are probably two parts to your question there as well. As mentioned, across regional Victoria there are some issues, as you say, with bus routes not going to all areas. I guess that comes down to that original comment I made around that the eligibility criteria from a Catholic student perspective is if there is capacity, Catholic students are then able to access the school bus service. It is actually reviewing that eligibility criteria that we need to start with. It is also varied around Victoria, where you referenced if there is spare capacity, as to whether the general public could have access. Spare capacity—that is ultimately another assessment that needs to occur, because I would suggest, without any specific numbers in front of me, it would be varied around Victoria in actual fact.

If I can digress just for a very quick moment, one of our schools also provided a submission, which is submission 123, Marist college in Warragul. If I can reference their document for a moment, because they actually attached to theirs a study on the Drouin area and it referenced the capacity at 88 per cent. Now, Drouin, being again on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne, is actually seeing quite significant growth, so there will be areas of lack of capacity, and I am sure in other areas there will be some capacity. Where there is that capacity, as I say, the concern is ultimately around child safety and the appropriate risk assessments that need to occur with respect to this.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. I will leave it at that, Chair, and come back if necessary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I might pass over to Mr Barton, then Mr Quilty, then Mr Tarlamis, in that order. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Paul. Paul, we had BusVic in today, and they made a submission on behalf of the members which run Victoria's bus services. They are quite adamant that there is an opportunity to expand on the bus service, and they made it absolutely clear that there are some services at capacity now. But this also opens up an opportunity, if we think about this, which is that those buses that are running at capacity now might move from an 18-seater bus to a 28-seater bus and be able to accommodate Catholic students, for instance. So there would be a further opportunity to improve the business and the delivery of that service. Do you agree with that assessment?

Mr VELTEN: Yes, certainly. As we have probably highlighted in our submission, there are some accessibility issues by Catholic students. So where that can be assessed and where that can be improved, as you have mentioned, in terms of increasing the seating size of a bus, it does actually represent great opportunity whereby it can then be further opened in relation to the needs of all students, because, as mentioned, there

would be some students that would miss out. Now, I certainly understand your reference as well in relation to the opportunity of extending that to beyond the student cohort into the general public, and again I guess the key point is around the safety and the risk assessments associated with that. I acknowledge that that cannot just be the risk assessment associated with the time lost travelling on the bus. When we are talking isolated drop-off and pick-up points there needs to be consideration with respect to that, and I guess that that child safety aspect is front of mind in respect to our concern and how that is assessed.

Mr BARTON: It is a genuine concern, and people have raised it repeatedly. But I will just say this—and if I may speak on behalf of Mrs McArthur and myself, we both lived in rural Victoria—my view is that in between milking runs and the afternoon school buses coming in there is a line-up of cars at the bus stop of family members picking up the kids. I am not suggesting for a moment that Mrs Mac had to walk with her horse and cart all the way back to the house, but we do not see that happening these days. There is normally a parent run, a member of the family, in the more rural ones. I accept your position. I certainly would not want to see a six-year-old standing in the middle of winter, with it pouring down with rain, and getting dropped off a bus and there are no houses within 2 kilometres or something. That would be unacceptable, and I do not think parents do it these days.

Mr VELTEN: Yes, I understand.

Mrs McARTHUR: Look, Chair, I think I had better just jump in here. Mr Barton has sort of been verballing me a bit. While I might have had difficulty with my pony, who left me stranded when it jumped back out of the pony paddock and ran home and then got attacked by the plovers, I did have to drive my children for at least half an hour to a bus. In my children's day, I do not know whether it is still available, you were allowed to get on a school bus to go to the nearest religious school of your choice. Is that not the case any longer?

Mr VELTEN: Again, the way it is assessed is around eligibility. I guess eligibility starts with the government schools and then the non-government school sector, and then it moves around: well, if there is capacity then those students can actually go on that bus. And where there is no capacity, what schools are faced with as well is actually setting up private bussing arrangements as well to then accommodate those students.

Mr BARTON: Sorry, Mrs Mac, do you want to go again?

Mrs McARTHUR: No, Rod. Thank you. I mean, I just think the rules are ridiculous. I do think that any child who needs to go to a school ought to be able to get on a bus if there is a bus going to a school. Only being able to access a bus if you are going to the nearest government school—the nearest government school might be rubbish. You might want to go to the next government school or to some other school. So I do think we have got to change this whole system of zoning and getting on a bus. If there is going to be a bus going to schools, and if governments are going to provide school buses, then you ought to be able to get on a bus and go to a school, regardless of where it is or what school you are going to, or who you are or whatever. Otherwise do away with the whole thing altogether. I mean, the rules and regulations are ridiculous.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your viewpoint, Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes, thanks. I thought you would like that, Chair.

The CHAIR: I will not comment on it. You have got it on the transcript. I will not respond to that commentary. I want to pass on to Mr Barton.

Mrs McARTHUR: I was just trying to hold back, Chair. I was trying to hold back.

The CHAIR: Yes. Mr Barton may have a couple more questions. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair, and I thank Mrs McArthur for showing restraint. Paul, the other thing I would like to say will just address the very genuine people's fears about safety for young children on school buses. We heard from Professor Stanley this morning from Melbourne University there is no evidence to support this fear, and she has worked not only in a background on transport but also in this area about assaults on children and things like that. We know bullying is a big issue on the buses, and that should not be done. Something that I did not know but I assumed is that there are no cameras on school buses, for instance, and I think that is an oversight that needs to be addressed immediately. Also if we said things like, as Professor

Stanley said this morning, the first half a dozen rows of seats, that is where any people come on board, but no-one should be coming on board if they are not prebooked—that is the other issue—so we know who they are when they are coming on board. And the other thing that we liked the idea of is perhaps there could be a monitor or some parents doing some volunteer runs, just on the morning run and in the afternoon on the school runs themselves. I think the fear of things happening actually on the bus can be countered. Would you be comfortable with those sorts of things being trialled?

Mr VELTEN: Well, first of all, I guess in providing the submission we provided, none of that was necessarily outlined as possibilities, so there was not necessarily any detail. So I guess our submission was always around raising concern from a child safety perspective, and then moving into that space of there need to be the appropriate risk assessments to ensure safety. Look, I am always cautious. Speaking for myself also as a parent, I am always cautious. We are very cautious and we are very concerned from the perspective of child safety, but I certainly note the comments and statements that you have already received through committee hearings in relation to how that could possibly work, and I guess that is part of that risk assessment that would have to occur.

Mr BARTON: Yes. I will let some others ask some questions—thank you, Paul—Chair, then I will come back if there is time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, we will come back to you if there is time. Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Can you expand a bit more on how school places are actually allocated, the bus places are allocated? I was not aware until reading your submission that there was a discrimination against non-government schools. Obviously for some schools that are locked in place there are places allocated, but if a new school comes along, they are just not even [inaudible]. How does it all work?

Mr VELTEN: I am sure it is probably on the education website, and I do not have that quickly at hand. There is what is called an eligibility criteria. I might have this not specifically right, but if you are an existing student from, let us say, the year before, then you get that automatic seat, and then it is government schools and then non-government schools, and there are a couple of other eligibility criteria underneath that. In terms of how that is then set in terms of size of buses, the bus routes and so forth, it comes down to—we work with the government schools, or at the school level the local Catholic school will work with the government schools to advise, ‘We have this number of students’, and we work with them to be able to get those students on the buses where appropriate. And look, they are very helpful; there is no question about that. But there are instances, as we have probably tried to highlight through our submission, where there are some students that are not successful in getting on one of those buses, yes.

Mr QUILTY: How would you reform the system? Would you make a voucher system where each student gets a certain amount of dollars allocated to them, depending on their distance from a school?

Mr VELTEN: Well, I think it starts with reviewing that whole space around the eligibility. You have really got to start with: well, all students need to be able to access the school bus system. Then I guess the second part to that is ensuring we have sufficient bus routes and capacity to meet the requirement of all school students.

Mr QUILTY: I guess we really need to hear from the department about how all this works more.

The CHAIR: Yes, good point, Mr Quilty. We are planning to have the department appear in our hearings in September.

Mr QUILTY: You talked about ministerial order 70, was it?

Mr VELTEN: Yes.

Mr QUILTY: We have a lot of kids in the city who ride on public buses, with a mix of adults and children every day, and that presumably is not breaching this order. Why would it be the case in regional buses?

Mr VELTEN: I guess that is a fair question and a fair comparison to ask. The point that I would probably make is we are talking about quite isolated networks and bus routes, whereas when you are talking metropolitan Melbourne it is generally quite congested, shall I say, in terms of whilst on public transport and then going

from, if you will, public transport to home or from home to where the public transport is. One of the key concerns there is obviously that it is a more isolated network by comparison.

Mr QUILTY: We have talked to previous witnesses about the possibility of gradual expansion of the program to more people, so starting off with recent school leavers still being allowed to access the bus for technical training or just for getting in and out of town. Do you think that would be acceptable to people?

Mr VELTEN: Well, if we extend that as well, sometimes you will have students who are undertaking the VCAL course where there might be a day of work experience, as an example, or it might be going to a TAFE, and being able to have accessible transport in some of those instances would be very helpful, I would imagine, because there would be instances where students would have transport difficulty in relation to such things as this, yes.

Mr QUILTY: I might pass on.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Quilty. I will pass to Mr Tarlamis to ask a question.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Paul. I do not have any questions at this stage. I am happy to cede my time to another committee member.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Mr Barton, because Mr Barton indicated he may have a couple of additional questions. Mr Barton, would you like to proceed?

Mr BARTON: Mr Quilty covered a staged approach, so I think that is about it unless Paul has got something he wants to say.

The CHAIR: I had one question, but I think Paul probably already answered it. I probably already know the answer to this, but should Catholic school students have equal access to services intended for public schools?

Mr VELTEN: What we have put in our submission would reflect that that is what we would be seeking—that there would be accessibility to all students in that regard, whether they are at a government school or not.

The CHAIR: You kind of stated that, but I just wanted to clarify. Fantastic. As Mr Barton said, is there anything further you would like to add or any other closing comments for the committee?

Mr VELTEN: I guess the closing comment, which was my closing comment in my opening statement, is very much around ensuring that we have that lens and focus on child safety because, as we have all rightly said, it is a concern to everyone.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. On that note, I wish to thank you and the diocese for your submission to our inquiry. It will assist with our deliberations. We will keep you posted on the final report in due course. Thank you very much for appearing today.

Mr VELTEN: Thank you for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.