

**Flying Minute: Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework Inquiry –
WALGA Submission (05-005-03-0013 ID)**

By Ian Duncan, Executive Manager, Infrastructure

That the submission to the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework be endorsed.

RESOLUTION 210.FM/2021

CARRIED

Executive Summary

- The Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee is leading an inquiry into the current Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) framework.
- This submission examines the relationship of the STAP to Local Government, with a focus on:
 - Restricted Access Vehicles;
 - Local Road Maintenance;
 - Turnaround Facilities;
 - Use of Local Government Property;
 - Students with Physical Mobility Issues; and
 - Population Decline and Economic Development.
- Policy recommendations are developed as part of this submission.
- The draft submission has been reviewed and supported by the Infrastructure Policy Team.
- Submissions to the Committee are due by Friday, 29 October.

Attachment

- WALGA Submission – Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework Inquiry

Background

The Public Accounts Committee of the WA Legislative Assembly is conducting an inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) framework. The STAP framework is applicable to students receiving Western Australian State Government transport assistance under the following conditions:

- Students live in rural areas and attend mainstream government and non-government schools, or
- Students have special needs and attend education support schools and centres provided by government and non-government agencies.

Submissions must be made by the Friday, 29 October and can address specific elements of the STAP Terms of Reference or the issues generally.

Comment

In brief, the policy recommendations in the draft submission are as follows:

1. Effective processes should be in place to ensure that Local Governments and Main Roads WA Heavy Vehicle Services are made aware of proposed changes to school bus routes.
2. The value of re-establishing school bus advisory committees or an alternative formal process for regular (perhaps annual) engagement between the PTA Contract Officer, Local Government, school and bus contractors should be evaluated.



3. The principles set out in the Agreement between WALGA and the Public Transport Authority Defining Roles and Responsibilities for Planning, Installation and Maintenance of Bus Stop Infrastructure (2018) should guide the approach to provide access for students with physical mobility issues.
4. The policy should provide guidance concerning how the health of a town (district) or remote community is considered in developing and applying the policy.
5. The inquiry should consider the option of providing students the choice of reliably accessing bus services, where these exist, to schools other than the closest school.

This draft submission has been reviewed and supported by the Infrastructure Policy Team.

FLYING MINUTE OUTCOME

Poll created: 19/10/2021 at 8:57

Poll closed: 25/10/2021 at 23:59

Total invited to survey: 21

Total finished survey: 13

Endorse the Recommendation: 11

Endorse the Recommendation subject to comment below: 2

Do not endorse: 0

First Name	Last Name	Completed Date
Carol	Adams OAM	Not completed
Phillip	Blight	25/10/2021 7:28
Ruth	Butterfield	26/10/2021 0:45
Karen	Chappel	20/10/2021 9:11
Cheryl	Cowell	Not completed
Malcolm	Cullen	19/10/2021 10:41
Frank	Cvitan	Not completed
Tony	Dean	19/10/2021 10:00
Catherine	Ehrhardt	Not completed
Russ	Fishwick	26/10/2021 10:21
Logan	Howlett JP	25/10/2021 9:27
Mark	Irwin	Not completed
Paul	Kelly	21/10/2021 20:27
Peter	Long	26/10/2021 13:39
Cate	McCullough	Not completed
Chris	Mitchell JP	24/10/2021 20:32
Les	Price	19/10/2021 22:09
Michelle	Rich	Not completed
Ken	Seymour	26/10/2021 13:34
Stephen	Strange	22/10/2021 16:36
Doug	Thompson	Not completed

Responses

(11) Endorse the Recommendation: Malcolm Cullen (on: 19/10/2021 10:41), Les Price (on: 19/10/2021 22:09), Paul Kelly (on: 21/10/2021 20:27), Phillip Blight (on: 25/10/2021 7:28), Stephen Strange (on: 22/10/2021 16:36), Chris Mitchell JP (on: 24/10/2021 20:32), Logan Howlett JP (on: 25/10/2021 9:27), Ruth Butterfield (on: 26/10/2021 0:45), Russ Fishwick (on: 26/10/2021 10:21), Peter Long (on: 26/10/2021 13:39), Ken Seymour (on: 26/10/2021 13:34)

(2) Endorse the Recommendation subject to comment below: Tony Dean (on: 19/10/2021 10:00), Karen Chappel (on: 20/10/2021 9:11)

(0) Do not endorse

Comments

Tony Dean on 19/10/2021 10:00

Page 5, "Social and Economic Sustainability"

Since the disaster of the policy of moving year 7s into high school has seen a decline in the smaller country school population. There is great pressure to move to a more centralised regional school as soon as possible and that now starts in year 5 rather than halfway through year six as in the past. This has put pressure on school bus services to provide seating capacity to move children to that more centralised school. As a former school Principal, I understand that pressure, it is a natural want of parents to do the best for their children. I contend that this pressure to provide bus services would not be there if local education facilities were brought up to a 21st century level of resources so that the need to move in year 5 or below was eliminated. The move after year 10 is a must for the majority of students in our District Highs. The perception to move before then is what is partially driving the population decline in country areas. The fear of missing out. How a bus policy should provide guidance to how the economic and social health of a regional and remote community sustainability is near impossible. It is education policy and human resource policy which is the main culprit.

Karen Chappel on 20/10/2021 9:11

In the dialogue it states that it would be helpful for the LG to be informed of changes to bus routes, I believe this could read as it is critical. The population decline and the consolidation of farms has led to further distances between passengers, currently I believe there is a criteria of so many kilometers (a bus contractor told me it was 7kms) per student pick up. This is not adequate anymore. The criteria for complimentary passenger is another area for review, what are the rules around this, they seem to move as it suits bus services. The impact of decisions from bus services can be as damaging as the removal of Yr 7 from primary school. If a bus is removed and a child has to move to another school in their late primary years the student is likely to go to Boarding school rather than start another school as required by bus services. I understand that it could be said that this is not a concern of LG but however the sustainability of our communities is.

Secretariat Comment

Cr Dean's comment has been noted.

To strengthen the submission in line with Cr Chappel's comments, the following text has been added/amended:

Under **Local Government and Student Transport:**

It is critical that effective processes be in place to ensure that Local Governments and Main Roads WA Heavy Vehicle Services are made aware of proposed changes to school bus routes.

Under **Population Decline and Economic Development:**

Additionally, the policy to provide complimentary seats to those students not eligible for Transport Assistance or those students who wish to travel to a school or education facility other than their Nearest Appropriate School should be reviewed. Some students receive complimentary seats on the 'Orange' School Bus to attend schools not defined as the Nearest Appropriate School. However, changes to bus routes or the increase in eligible students can result in the student no longer having a seat on the bus. This can result in students leaving



community schools to attend boarding schools, which can lead to further population decline in regional or remote areas.

The current policy can create conditions that may lead to a decline in population in some centres, as families or students move away to pursue educational opportunities. This may have a negative impact on the economic vitality of those communities.

The submission was updated with these inclusions and submitted to the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee Inquiry panel via email.

Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework Inquiry

Submission

Acknowledgement

The WA Local Government Association (WALGA) acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land and pays respects to Elders past and present.

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Introduction

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the peak industry body for Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based organisation representing and supporting the work and interests of 139 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for over 1,220 elected members and approximately 22,000 Local Government employees as well as over 2.67 million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia. WALGA also provides professional advice and offers services that provide financial benefits to the Local Governments and the communities they serve.

The Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (Committee) is leading an inquiry into the current Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) Framework and is seeking feedback from Local Governments in Western Australia. WALGA would like to submit the following points for consideration.

Eligibility Criteria

The STAP framework is applicable to students receiving Western Australian State Government transport assistance under the following conditions:

- Students live in rural areas and attend mainstream government and non-government schools, or
- Students have special needs and attend education support schools and centres provided by government and non-government agencies.

Terms of Reference

The Committee is seeking feedback on the STAP framework terms of reference, which can be found in Appendix A: STAP Terms of Reference.

Local Governments and Student Transport

While responsibility for the Student Transport Assistance Program falls under the Public Transport Authority of Western Australia (PTA) School Bus Services (SBS) branch, Local Government services influence student transport, primarily through the provision and maintenance of infrastructure and the application of construction standards.

Restricted Access Vehicles

Many trucks operating on rural and remote roads in Western Australia are longer and heavier than prescribed in the *Road Traffic (Vehicles) Regulations (2014)*. These truck combinations (road trains) are referred to as Restricted Access Vehicles (RAVs). Due to their size and weight, for safety reasons RAVs are permitted to operate only on certain roads. Many access roads under the control of Local Governments do not meet the minimum width requirements for safe operation of RAVs. However, where the volume of traffic is low, use of these roads by RAVs may be permitted by Main Roads WA subject to a range of operating conditions. The operating conditions are typically identified by and implemented in consultation with the relevant Local Government. These operating conditions seek to manage the safety risks through reduced speeds, use of warning lights or radio communications and other measures.

A reasonably commonly applied standard condition is:

“Operation is not permitted while the school bus is operating on the road. Operators must contact the relevant schools directly and obtain school bus timetables; or where direct contact can be made with the school bus driver, operation is permitted once the school bus driver confirms all school drop-offs/ pick-ups have been completed on the road.”

Local Governments generally seek that this condition be applied on narrow roads that are school bus routes. The roads to which this RAV access condition is applied need to be adjusted in response to changes to school bus routes.

Main Roads WA may be reluctant to apply new conditions to roads that have previously been approved for RAV access without that condition. It is recommended that a process to achieve an effective liaison between the PTA and Main Roads WA Heavy Vehicle Services be established to ensure that the conditions of RAV access are adjusted in response to changes to school bus routes. It may be necessary to consult Local Governments as part of this process to confirm current road conditions.

RAV networks and school bus routes are both recorded in GIS format. Overlaying these should provide an effective way of identifying overlap on particularly classes of roads.

Local Road Maintenance

The provision of Local Government roads in reasonable condition enables SBS to safely transport students to and from school. The responsibility of each Local Government is to maintain the local road network to a reasonable standard to provide safe, comfortable travel. Local Government road maintenance policies typically consider use of the road (traffic volume (heavy and light vehicles), road hierarchy etc) in determining appropriate maintenance strategies, particularly for unsealed roads. Use by School Bus services is typically a criterion used to determine the appropriate strategy for each road section.

While details of current school bus routes are available to Local Governments through the SLIP, it would be helpful for Local Governments to be notified of changes to routes to enable them to ensure that the maintenance and management strategies for those roads are appropriate to the changed needs.

Turnaround Facilities

The Student Transport Assistance Policy refers to potential requirements for a “site suitable for the construction of a turnaround” (p 80, 81). It does not provide any indication about how or by whom this is assessed, and who is responsible for the construction of a turnaround. If the turnaround is to be constructed within the road reserve, Local Governments must be engaged in decision-making and give approval for this work.

SBS use of Local Government Private Property

SBS policy advises against driving school buses onto private property without prior agreement between all affected parties (SBS and the owner of property or Local Government). In certain instances, Local Governments may be requested by SBS to use Local Government private property as a pick-up/drop-off point or for use as a turn-around point. Local Governments can assess each request on a case-by-case basis.

It is critical that effective processes be in place to ensure that Local Governments and Main Roads WA Heavy Vehicle Services are made aware of proposed changes to school bus routes.

The value of re-establishing school bus advisory committees or an alternative formal process for regular (perhaps annual) engagement between the PTA Contract Officer, Local Government, school and bus contractors should be evaluated.

Students with Physical Mobility Issues

For students with physical mobility issues, it is important that facilities are designed and constructed such that these students can safely access the school from the drop-off point and the pick-up point from the school. SBS endeavours to provide the

same level of service to students with physical mobility issues that it provides to other rural students attending mainstream schools.

The current Student Transport Assistance Policy suggests that issues relating to access to transport services be addressed by Local Governments. The Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport were formulated under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and came into operation in 2002. The Standards establish minimum accessibility requirements to be met by providers and operators of public transport conveyances, infrastructure and premises. In order to jointly meet these requirements over time, the PTA and WALGA entered into a Partnership Agreement defining roles and responsibilities for ensuring access to public transport.

The principles set out in the Agreement between WALGA and the Public Transport Authority Defining Roles and Responsibilities for Planning, Installation and Maintenance of Bus Stop Infrastructure (2018) should guide the approach to provide access for students with physical mobility issues.

Social and Economic Sustainability

The Student Transport Assistance Policy identifies that, “in many areas, the school bus is important to the health of a town or remote community and is in many cases intrinsic to the education of students.”¹ Local Governments in rural and remote parts of Western Australia are acutely aware of this fact. However, the health of a town (or district) or remote community does not appear to be considered in the policies and decision-making criteria detailed in the policy. Over time Local Governments have identified how individual and cumulative decisions regarding access to Student Transport impacts school populations, decisions by parents regarding which schools to enrol their children in and ultimately decisions to close schools and other services.

The policy should provide guidance concerning how the health of a town (district) or remote community is considered in developing and applying the policy.

Population Decline and Economic Development

The requirement contained in the current Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework that students are only eligible to be transported to the closest applicable school can impact on the population and economic vitality of regional and remote population centres, particularly where it causes families to relocate based on the accessibility of suitable schools. By only allowing students to attend the closest school, which may only support a limited number of courses and may not provide education past year 6 or year 10, some families may decide to relocate to areas where access to more suitable educational opportunities are available. This lack of flexibility in school choice can lead to a decline in continuing studies to years 11

¹ Public Transport Authority. (2020). Student Transport Assistance Policy and Operational Guidelines p7

and 12, due to the need to move schools or limited subject choices that may not fit the students' aptitudes.

Additionally, the policy to provide complimentary seats to those students not eligible for Transport Assistance or those students who wish to travel to a school or education facility other than their Nearest Appropriate School should be reviewed. Some students receive complimentary seats on the 'Orange' School Bus to attend schools not defined as the Nearest Appropriate School. However, changes to bus routes or the increase in eligible students can result in the student no longer having a seat on the bus. This can result in students leaving community schools to attend boarding schools, which can lead to further population decline in regional or remote areas.

The current policy can create conditions that may lead to a decline in population in some centres, as families or students move away to pursue educational opportunities. This may have a negative impact on the economic vitality of those communities.

The inquiry should consider the option of providing students the choice of reliably accessing bus services, where these exist, to schools other than the closest school.

Sources

Public Transport Authority. (2020). *Student Transport Assistance Policy and Operational Guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolbuses.wa.gov.au/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=fTTuehnLbaY%3D&portalid=2> on 24 September, 2021.

Main Roads WA, November 2019 *Standard Restricted Access Vehicle (RAV) Route Assessment Guidelines* Document No: D14#493277, Retrieved from: <https://www.mainroads.wa.gov.au/globalassets/heavy-vehicles/rav-access/access-guide-standard-restricted-access-vehicle-rav-route-assessment-guidelines>

Appendix A: STAP Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the STAP framework include the following points:

- a) the eligibility criteria for students to qualify for transport assistance, including:
 - i. nearest appropriate school;
 - ii. access to spurs; and
 - iii. inclusion of social, community, and economic and financial factors;
- b) the types of transport assistance and entitlements to be provided to ensure students can undertake an appropriate education;
- c) the relevance of existing policies, practices and rules that are applied in delivering the transport assistance arrangements;
- d) the assessment process when evaluating the safety of bus stops and routes;
- e) the implication of the National Disability Insurance Scheme on the delivery of transport assistance for students attending Education Support facilities;
- f) the contractual arrangements with services providers, including the appropriateness of current school bus contracts, and payment arrangements, and previous contractual arrangements and the manner in which they were created;
- g) the resourcing of the School Bus Services division with the Public Transport Authority;
- h) the appropriateness of the conveyance allowance as an alternative to transport assistance.