

SCHOOL BUS SERVICES

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.47 am]: I would like to thank the Minister for Transport for taking my grievance today on the school bus services inquiry recommendations and regulations. During estimates this year I asked the minister about funding over the forward estimates and also when the recommendations from the 2022 *Bus Fair* report were going to be released with updated and new regulations for 2024. As the minister knows, 170 pages of hard work was put in by the Public Accounts Committee. In response to a question relating to an increase in the forward estimates for regional school bus services, the minister said —

I understand there has been an increase in costs and services. The implementation of some of the recommendations of the report has not been fully funded yet. There was some small expansion of the team, responding to the recommendations, and also management of the services.

The minister said at the time that difficult decisions were to be made, particularly around such regulations as school of choice versus supporting the closest appropriate school. The role of district high schools was also stated by the minister as being probably one of the biggest and more contentious education issues across the state. During estimates, the Minister for Transport said she had had initiated discussions with the Minister for Education, but added that she had not really progressed to any decisions. Since estimates in May this year, there has been very little in the way of regulations and policies relating to the released report. It is now September and we will soon be coming into the fourth school term. There is no sign of the updated regulations. Parents are already contacting my office regarding updates to the regulations that may have an impact on their children's schooling and their own day-to-day lives in getting their children to school.

The *Bus Fair* report highlights some of the difficult issues parents face getting their children to school. Some have had to quit jobs so that they can get their children to bus stops kilometres from their homes. In some instances, parents were notified on the last day of term, before a new term, that their children would now need to attend a different school. The Minister for Transport would have received a letter from the Shire of West Arthur regarding the particular issues it faces. The letter was copied to me. It was written on 2 June, 2023.

In the correspondence, the following was noted, according to my notes —

1. Six months have passed since the Ministers undertook to carry out research on the recommendations (specifically for this area, Recommendations 2 and 3)
2. Darkan is a special case as it shares borders with seven other LGA's
3. There is no high school in West Arthur
4. Senior High Schools exist in Collie and Narrogin, and there are District High Schools in Wagin, Kojonup and Boyup Brook
5. The bus for the high school runs between Darkan and Collie, and because of this Collie SHS is the preferred option for many parents after Year 6 at the Darkan PS.

Of course, people who live 500 metres on any side of Darkan can be distributed to four different district high schools. The letter continues —

6. Current bus doesn't have enough seats.
7. SBS under the current regulations will not enable a larger bus as the extra students are still considered complimentary.
8. West Arthur Shire is seeking Minister's assistance in directing SBS to approve applications from families located in the shire on the basis that their children are eligible, rather than complimentary passengers on the Darkan to Collie school bus routes.

As the minister can see, a level of urgency is required so that these types of issues can be addressed. For parents in isolated regional areas, the orange school bus is the difference between employment and unemployment. This service is critical.

School Bus Services has always worked with my office to try to solve difficult situations for parents, and I appreciate the contact we have with them. The need for the new regulations to be made public is important for parents who are working out their school logistics. In regional areas, families frequently move around to new employment. When their children reach school years, they will move to jobs and accommodation that include a bus pick-up. For some of these families the suggested November submission for next year's transport assistance application is a very busy time. Parents will be working through the logistics for bus applications now so that they have the paperwork done before they are swamped with harvest requirements and other issues. Ongoing discussions regarding the regulations are apparently going to be held between the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Education, and then they

must go to cabinet to be signed off. I raised this with the Minister for Education yesterday in private members' business. I would like to know when the regulations will be available for public release. As the minister knows, recommendation 5 refers to the nearest appropriate school. We are still waiting for a response to that, further to the initial response —

The State Government notes that granting eligibility to students in these situations may also impact the 90-minute travel rule ...

That is a convenient excuse but I do not believe it is relevant in this case. The response continues —

The State Government also notes that it may not always be possible to extend a bus service, so the payment of a conveyance allowance may be required to enable a student to meet the service enroute.

That is about the nearest appropriate school in the response to recommendation 5. The other one is recommendation 2, which I know is challenging. It relates to district high schools and it is very important. As I said yesterday in my contribution, the School of Isolated and Distance Education is now becoming the largest school in the state. District high schools with smaller numbers are also becoming an issue. During the week, another bus run closed down in Jerramungup, leaving another two families stranded a long way from their schools. This is a real issue. I have a lot of families who are very concerned. The silence is deafening and I look forward to the minister's response. We put a lot of hard work into that inquiry.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.35 am]: I thank the member for his grievance. It is a challenging issue across government. It is so challenging that it is something the member's government did not touch for eight years. The Public Accounts Committee reviewed school bus services and made a range of recommendations. In accepting all those recommendations, we said it would take time to work through a number of them, including the most controversial, challenging and difficult to implement—that is, allowing students to bypass a closer district high school in favour of attending a senior high school. We will also allow other factors to be considered in determining which school bus service a student is eligible for.

Since the government response was released, the Public Transport Authority has been working very closely with the Department of Education. In my response to the member during the estimates hearing, I probably did not highlight the amount of work that was being undertaken by both agencies together to determine the policies going forward. Of course, and as the member highlighted at the end of his grievance, the issue of the number of attendees at district high schools is something that the education department is rightly concerned about. The number of students who attend district high schools can start to dwindle to such a point it can impact the viability of those schools. That is why the education department is very concerned about how our School Bus Services will determine our policies on schools. That is why it has always been a tricky issue to address and why governments have been reluctant to look at it. We are looking at it. In the next few months, we will be publishing the response to the student transport assistance policy and the new guidelines. I will work further with the Minister for Education on those. In the next few months, we will be publishing the new guidelines, which will determine this framework into the future.

On the issues in the Shire of West Arthur, I know my agency has been in contact with affected families who currently have children on school buses. I understand that people want certainty for next year. I understand that and I will be working to make sure the new guidelines are released as soon as possible. On the example in the Shire of West Arthur the member provided, I can advise that 16 students will have their status changed from complimentary to eligible. That will help those 16 students. That represents 90 of the students affected in the area. There are two or three others who have already applied to the School Bus Services website. On the example the member provided, action has been undertaken and the PTA is working with the families. As I said, we will continue to work through it. Both agencies are working very closely together. We will release the new guidelines shortly. In the meantime, I will make sure that the Minister for Education is comfortable with the new guidelines, as I know the department has very much been working with the PTA.

It is a tricky issue across government. We want to support families living in the regions. We know that getting kids to school is a logistical challenge for everybody, particularly people living in regional Western Australia where travel times and access are paramount to how they operate on a daily basis. I very much understand the challenge and we look forward to continuing to work to meet those challenges. With the example the member gave, the good news so far is that the agency has been working with the affected families and helping to provide a solution.