



26 October 2021

The Public Accounts Committee

WA Legislative Assembly

Via email to: [lapac@parliament.wa.gov.au](mailto:lapac@parliament.wa.gov.au)

Dear Committee Members,

### **Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework Inquiry**

#### **Submission from the Shire of Morawa – Western Australia**

On behalf of the Shire of Morawa, we appreciate the opportunity to provide inputs towards the review of the Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework.

Morawa is a country area situated approximately 4 hours north of Perth and 1.5 hours in land from the nearest regional centre being Geraldton, in the Mid-West Region of WA.

The Shire seeks to raise general issues with the current framework to guide thinking during the review phase.

Whilst responsibility for the Student Transport Assistance Program falls under the Public Transport Authority of Western Australia (PTA) School Bus Services (SBS) branch, the Shire of Morawa interacts with this service primarily through the provision and maintenance of infrastructure and the application of construction standards.

In general, the Shire of Morawa has experienced a lack of consultation before the SBS allocates school bus routes. This is problematic for the Shire for several reasons.

#### 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 Shire of Morawa 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 and the Shire subject to a range of operating conditions. These operating conditions seek to manage the safety risks through reduced speeds, use of warning lights or radio communications and other measures.

Where a school bus is known to operate a condition applied is such that:

“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.”

However, when bus routes change regularly this puts an unnecessary condition on RAV vehicle movements on roads where the bus no longer operates, and it may mean the new roads may have RAV vehicles operating without this condition if a school bus has not historically operated on this route.

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 Shire, 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.

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 roads in reasonable condition enables SBS to safely transport students to and from school. The Shire of Morawa endeavors to maintain its roads to a suitable standard with a limited budget. The Shire’s maintenance program considers road usage (traffic volumes, heavy and light vehicles, and school bus use) as a key factor when allocating resources. With a lack of consultation, it has resulted in the Shire having to redirect limited resources to roads allocated by SBS with no prior notice to ensure the road standard is improved.

While details of current school bus routes are available to Local Governments through the SLIP, it would be more helpful if the program showed courtesy to the important role small Shire’s with limited resources play in road maintenance and engaged proactively prior to routes changing.

As well as a lack of consultation the Shire of Morawa has also noticed a worrying trend in terms of the provision of services.

Route changes have led to increased travel distances for parents to drop children at pick up points, this in term may encourage them to seek alternate schooling options which then detracts from the viability of our school.

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.” The Shire of Morawa is aware of this and understands the importance of the school to our economy and population but 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. Various decisions in relation to school bus routes have been made on an economical or logistical basis with limited regard for the cumulative impact the decisions have regarding access to Student Transport and the flow on impacts on school populations, decisions by parents regarding which schools to enroll their children in and ultimately



population decline, decisions to close schools and other services being withdrawn from rural communities.

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

The policy framework requirement that students are only eligible to be transported to the closest applicable school does not consider the varied educational options and schooling choice in areas where distance variations are minor. This is evident for Morawa which hosts a larger High School and Agricultural College facilities but some marginal students on the boundaries with other Shire's are missing out on the school bus by a matter of kilometers. Whilst, at this stage many still choose to attend the Morawa school this is only due to the perseverance of parents.

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 and 12, due to the need to move schools or limited subject choices that may not fit the students' aptitudes. The outcome may be a decline in population in some centres, as families 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.

School buses are an important service for our Community and with a few improvements the service could run even better and ensure education services available to children in regional areas are maintained at a high standard, so families don't need to relocate for schooling.

Kind Regards,

Scott Wildgoose  
**Chief Executive Officer**