

INQUIRY INTO PRIVATISATION OF BUS SERVICES

Organisation: Willoughby City Council

Date Received: 29 March 2022



29 March 2022

Director
Portfolio Committee No. 6 (Transport and Customer Service)
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: INQUIRY INTO THE PRIVATISATION OF BUS SERVICES
WILLOUGHBY CITY COUNCIL SUBMISSION**

The NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 6 (Transport and Customer Service) is conducting an inquiry into the privatisation of bus services in metropolitan Sydney. Willoughby City Council (Council) has been invited to make a submission to the inquiry. The Terms of Reference are:

1. *That Portfolio Committee No. 6 inquire into the privatisation of bus services via the Sydney Metropolitan Bus Contracts, and in particular:*
 - (a) *the modelling, rationale and process of privatising bus services,*
 - (b) *the impact on the commuting public through the loss of bus stops and services,*
 - (c) *the economic, social, safety, employment and environmental implications of bus privatisation,*
 - (d) *the transition to an electric bus fleet and supporting infrastructure,*
 - (e) *the impact of bus privatisation on worker pay and conditions, and*
 - (f) *any other relevant matter.*
2. *That the committee report by 1 October 2022.*

It is acknowledged that some of these points are a matter for the NSW Government and as such, the comments provided on the following pages relate to points (b), (c), (d) and (f). Councillors have also encouraged residents to provide feedback directly to this inquiry with their own submissions.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Arnott
PLANNING MANAGER, PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into privatisation of bus services – Willoughby City Council submission

The below comments are grouped into the following sections:

1. **Background**
2. **Comments in response points (b) and (c) of the Terms of Reference**
3. **Comments in response points (d) of the Terms of Reference**
4. **Comments in response points (f) of the Terms of Reference**

1. Background

Bus operations and contract regions:

Bus operations in metropolitan Sydney are divided into 14 contract regions. Contracts are issued by the NSW Government (Transport for NSW) to bus companies to operate services for each region. The Willoughby local government area (LGA) is served by buses from regions with the current operators:

- **Region 7** (Northwest and Lower North Shore): Operated by Busways since January 2022
- **Region 8** (Northern Beaches): Operated by Keolis Downer Northern Beaches since October 2021
- **Region 12** (Upper North Shore): Operated by Transdev NSW since at least 2013
- **Region 14** (Forest District): Operated by Forest Coach Lines since at least 2013

Note Region 7 includes operation of the Willoughby bus depot located in Stan St, Willoughby East. These four regions of relevance to the Willoughby LGA are shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1: Sydney Metropolitan Bus Contract Regions. Source: Transport for NSW (August 2011)

The importance of bus services to the Willoughby community:

A safe, reliable, frequent, accessible and customer-focused bus system is essential for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the vibrant and growing Willoughby community.

Council has recognised the importance of the bus system – and the Chatswood bus interchange in particular – through its strategic and transport planning:

- In *Willoughby Local Strategic Planning Statement (LSPS)*, priority 7 is: “Developing the Willoughby City transport system and Chatswood’s role as a true transport hub for Willoughby City and the North Shore”.
- In *Willoughby Integrated Transport Strategy 2036*, strategic direction 2 is: “Our transport system will provide excellent local and regional connectivity and be accessible to all”.
- In *Chatswood CBD Planning and Urban Design Strategy 2036*, Council has articulated its long-term vision to expand and improve the operation of the Chatswood bus interchange.

Chatswood interchange, new infrastructure and planned growth:

Many bus routes (from all relevant regions 7, 8, 12 and 14) converge at the Chatswood bus interchange. Private (predominantly for schools) and community bus services are also centred on Chatswood.

There are longstanding issues with the bus interchange at Chatswood. It is already at capacity with little room for physical growth unless a significant level of planning and investment is made by Transport for NSW and Council. Buses frequently layover on local streets, taking up valuable kerbside space and contributing to congestion, air pollution and noise and creating hazards to pedestrian safety in particular.

Demand for bus services generally – and pressure on the Chatswood interchange in particular – will only increase in future due to new infrastructure and planned growth. This includes:

- The imminent completion of the Sydney Metro City & Southwest which will further strengthen the importance of Chatswood CBD as a residential, employment and services hub as well as a major multi-modal transport interchange.
- Further residential and jobs growth forecast across both the Willoughby LGA and broader northern Sydney region. This includes the growth hub of Frenchs Forest, one of the only strategic centres in Sydney without a connection to the railway or metro network, thus reliant on bus services to provide public transport access to the rest of Sydney.
- The planned B-Line bus rapid transit route between Chatswood and Dee Why – again, a vital public transport link between two major centres due to lack of railway or metro connection.

Furthermore, if the Beaches Link tunnel is built, it is likely that many services to/from the Northern Beaches will be diverted to the tunnel, leaving the Willoughby LGA with an even more degraded bus service.

School services:

Bus services are vital for the many school children who attend schools in the Willoughby LGA and surrounding region.

As an example, part of the catchment area for the Lindfield Learning Village (LLV) school falls within the Willoughby LGA. Students of the school come from across northern Sydney and many live in areas that are distant from bus stops or require catching multiple and often disjointed services.

Council officers were part of the LLV working group meetings that took place in 2021. This group brought together various stakeholders to discuss travel and transport issues with the growing school, including implementing the Travel Plan that was a condition of the school’s planning approval. A key issue that

emerged from this process was the importance of bus services, given the projected maximum enrolment of the school (c. 2,000 students) and its relatively isolated location on an escarpment not within reasonable walking distance of either Lindfield or Roseville train stations.

Despite this process – and separate lobbying by LLV and parents – there is still deficiencies in bus services. Students often have to wait at completely unmarked phantom bus stops and at times the school buses are too full to take them to school. This is a post-privatisation example of changes made poorly and retrospectively on what was a relatively small and predictable change in service demand.

Bus commuting, the COVID pandemic and changed travel patterns:

According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census, 12% of employed residents in the Willoughby LGA used buses as their primary mode of travel to work, double the Greater Sydney average of 6.1%. Furthermore, 23.5% nominated train as their primary mode (against the Greater Sydney average of 16.2%), and many of these trips may also involve a bus journey.

Given the Willoughby LGA has close to the highest number of professionals in Sydney, many of these workers moved to working from home during the COVID pandemic. Most are now working from home at least some of the time. Many are at home and are commuting at different hours of the day. Yet there does not seem to be a plan to track these changes so that more frequent services are offered during off-peak times. Short, infrequent and unreliable local services between suburbs that are not on main routes (i.e. Castle Cove, Middle Cove, Castlecrag, West Chatswood, East Lindfield and Roseville) into Chatswood has only perpetuated high car dependence and low bus patronage.

While the COVID pandemic has dented public transport patronage for over two years, it is clear that people are returning to public transport and thus the need for quality bus services remains.

Recent changes to bus services in Regions 7 and 8:

A variety of changes to bus services in Region 8 were announced in October 2020 and took effect in December 2020. While on balance Council officers believe these changes improved services in Region 8, there were a number of changes which resulted in a worsening of services. This included the loss of direct service to the front entrance of the Royal North Shore Hospital, a service which is obviously of particular importance to older and less mobile passengers. Another concern was the reduction or loss of direct services between East Chatswood / Castle Cove and the Northern Beaches, in particularly the Northern Beaches Hospital, another important service for this demographic.

The effects of these changes were raised in a meeting between Council officers and representatives from Transport for NSW in November 2020. Furthermore, they were detailed in a letter to the Premier sent by Council officers in December 2020 (see **Attachment 1**). A response from the Transport Minister (via Premier) was received in February 2021 (see **Attachment 2**), however this did not result in any modifications to the changes, which by that time had taken place.

Changes to services in Region 7 were also announced and took effect in January 2021. Prior to the commencement of operations in Region 7 by Busways, it is understood that services along Willoughby Road were reduced. Many local residents believe this was to increase services on the Northern Beaches. The spokes have been introduced but no new hubs. This means there is no easy way for commuters to change services before going over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and into the Sydney CBD. Direct services taking passengers to destinations in the Eastern Suburbs e.g. St Vincent's Hospital and the stadiums at Moore Park have been dropped entirely. There is the new 160X service to Dee Why and longstanding 144 service to Manly, but otherwise no other direct services to the region's beaches.

2. Comments in response points (b) and (c) of the Terms of Reference

(b) the impact on the commuting public through the loss of bus stops and services

(c) the economic, social, safety, employment and environmental implications of bus privatisation

While private bus companies have operated in metropolitan Sydney for many years (including in Regions 12 and 14) it is fair to say that the announcement in October 2019 that the final NSW Government-operated contract regions (including Regions 7 and 8) would be put to private tender has generated considerable debate and controversy. For drivers and other existing staff, this includes concerns about job security and benefits. For the community i.e. bus users, concerns relate to impacts on services including the potential for a reduction and/or elimination of routes and reduction in service frequencies.

It is understood that overall planning of bus routes remains the responsibility of Transport for NSW. Modifications to bus services (such as those that occurred in Region 7 and 8) happen occasionally in response to ongoing analysis of patronage (i.e. Opal and other data) to suit demand, fleet and operational requirements. It is thus understood that the aforementioned service changes were generally unrelated to the tender process for Regions 7 and 8 which occurred throughout 2020 and 2021.

Nevertheless, the issues describe above highlight the importance of bus services to the Willoughby community, particularly for school children, older and less mobile passengers. As far as Council officers are aware, these changes were undertaken without any significant consultation with Councillors, Council officers or the community.

It is understood that the privatisation model enables the NSW Government to pay on an algorithm based on routes, service and passenger numbers and assumes a hub and spoke model of route planning. However, Council believes that the Willoughby LGA has not been allocated sufficient budget or infrastructure to meet the needs of its residents and workers. There is scope to purchase additional routes and services for the benefit of the Willoughby community, a group of citizens who – when good services are provided e.g. the train service and the former frequent commuter buses now reduced – have showed that they are prepared to use such services.

Council is concerned that there is no effective model for change of routes, frequency and regularity of services even with known and forecast changes in travel patterns and growth, in addition to insufficient infrastructure funding from the NSW Government to ensure a continuity of effective training and good service in and out of the Chatswood CBD in particular. No growth or change model is evident in the service and there is no apparent process to adjust the service or fund it better and to place services in ahead of this growth and change, such as that projected due to the Sydney Metro City & Southwest and planned B-Line link between Chatswood and Dee Why.

It is Council's belief that there is much room for improvement with the bus services currently provided in the Willoughby LGA. The shift to the model of private operators for Regions 7 and 8 should be used an opportunity to improve services, rather than reduce them to find 'cost efficiencies' i.e. save money. While it is recognised that efficiencies need to be found, regular, scheduled bus routes serve an important part of the transport system, including to achieve broader goals of reducing emissions, congestion and car dependence. Efficiency gains should not be to the detriment of service quality. More routes and services need to be provided by the private operators in all regions, led by planning at the Transport for NSW level.

Finally, any future modifications to routes, frequencies etc. should only take place following early and meaningful consultation with Council and the community, something that was completely lacking in with the changes that took place in late 2020 and early 2021 for services in Regions 7 and 8.

3. Comments in response point (d) of the Terms of Reference:

(d) the transition to an electric bus fleet and supporting infrastructure,

The ongoing transition of NSW's public bus fleet to a zero-emission, all-electric fleet by 2030 is welcomed. However, it is understood that only a small portion of the fleet is proposed to be electric at this stage. Furthermore, Council would appreciate further advice and consultation with Transport for NSW and bus operators (particularly Region 7 which includes the Willoughby bus depot) into how this will be achieved and what infrastructure requirements, if any, may be required in the Willoughby LGA.

4. Comments in response point (f) of the Terms of Reference:

(f) any other relevant matter

Council supports bus services that traverse the local road network. This approach enables buses to meet the needs of a higher proportion of the community. Many local roads in the Willoughby LGA are narrow with parking permitted on one and both sides of the road. There is an ongoing issue with the use of 12.5m or longer buses in these narrow streets. This can lead to service disruptions and crashes between vehicles. The removal of parking to support bus operations has been used to-date however this approach leads to an undesirable reduction in local amenity and access for residents and visitors. It would be desirable that the use of smaller buses is promoted in circumstances where the road network has width constraints. Increased frequency of services of buses in these instances would offset the reduction in seating capacity provided in larger buses.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 – Letter to Premier – Bus service changes in Region 8 – 22 December 2020

Attachment 2 – Letter of Response to Council from Premier and Transport Minister – Bus services in Region 8 – 17 February 2021