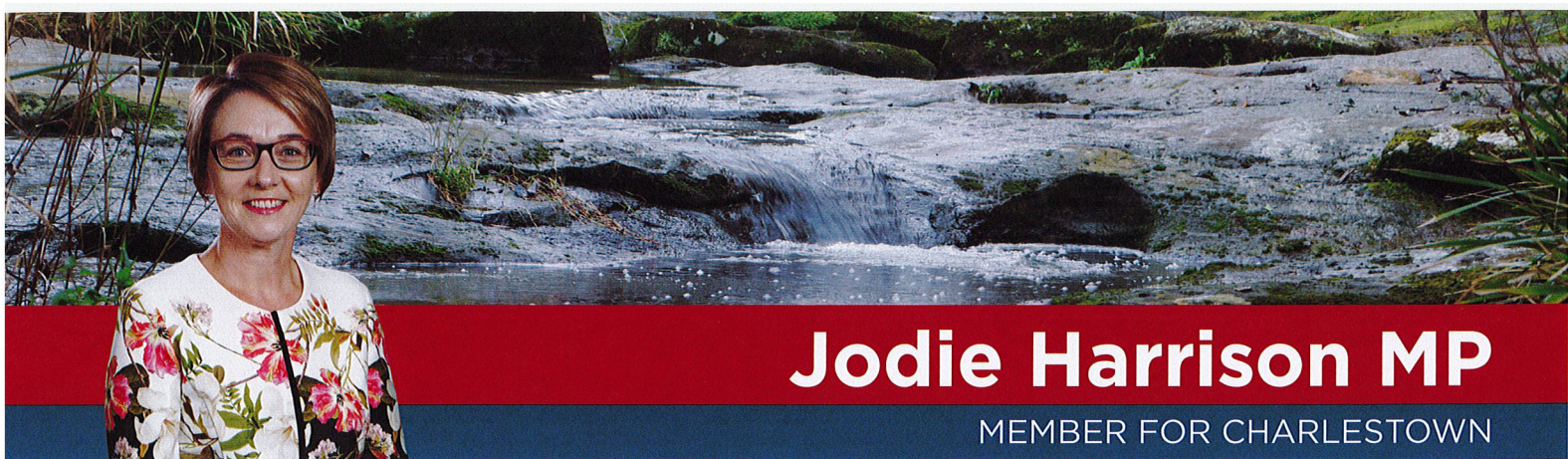


INQUIRY INTO PRIVATISATION OF BUS SERVICES

Name: Ms Jodie Harrison MP, Member for Charlestown

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Jodie Harrison MP

MEMBER FOR CHARLESTOWN

30 March 2022

The Hon Abigail Boyd MLC
Chair
Portfolio Committee No. 6 – Transport
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Boyd

I write today regarding the Committee's inquiry into the privatisation of bus services. I note in particular section 1(a) of the Terms of Reference, which directs the Committee to inquire into the impact on the commuting public through the loss of bus stops and services with the privatisation of bus services via the Sydney Metropolitan Bus Contracts.

As you may recall, Newcastle Buses was privatised in mid 2017. The network, which services most of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie, is now operated by private provider Keolis Downer. I believe the experiences of the Charlestown electorate throughout the privatisation process and in the years since will be illuminating for the Committee.

Keolis Downer, after a period of public consultation, introduced new timetables and routes which were brought into effect in January 2018. This resulted in a dramatic cut to services, poorer connectivity and longer journey times, particularly for Charlestown commuters. In the aftermath of these changes, my office was inundated by complaints of late buses, missed connections, longer waiting times, stranded school children, and even of elderly people and people with disabilities missing medical appointments and losing social connections because they could no longer rely on public transport.

I am driven by the poor experiences of many of my constituents, both in the immediate aftermath of the privatisation of Newcastle Buses and in the years since, to make a submission to this inquiry. The impact on my community over the short and long term was enormous, and in many ways difficult to quantify.

Many of those most directly impacted by the changes brought on by the privatisation were people who most need our support: . The disruption of the public transport network imposed by Keolis Downer, which was ultimately caused by the decision taken by this Government to privatise Newcastle public transport, saw some of the most vulnerable of my constituents lose social connections, work opportunities and independence.

Transport for NSW data corroborated this, with figures for the first four months of 2018—the first four months of the private operator's new timetable and routes—showing a 7.3% decrease in patronage for seniors and pensioners on the network compared with the corresponding period last year. Seniors were not the only people who found their lives and livelihoods negatively impacted. Reduced operating hours meant that shift workers were unable to get to and from work, and increased journey times have had a significant impact on the livelihood of commuters.

However, perhaps none were impacted more heavily than people living with disabilities.

Amongst those who contacted my office immediately after the change of timetables was a man named Allan, who was then in his late sixties. He wrote to me on behalf of his daughter, a woman living with a disability, who relied on public transport to get to work at House with No Steps in New Lambton from her home in Adamstown Heights. The bus service she caught prior to the change took fifteen minutes, plus twelve minutes of walking to and from stops, to get her to work and then back home.

The new timetable imposed a significant change on this young woman, requiring her to take three buses on an hour and a half journey which would, ultimately get her to work at an inappropriate time. Worse still, she was faced with a return journey of three and a half hours due to timetable clashes. Allan wrote that his daughter's disability would make it particularly difficult for her to manage this complex set of transfers and would inevitably result in her being stranded in unfamiliar places when buses were delayed or services were cancelled. Allan's daughter was one of just seven people living with disability who made use of the cancelled service.

Another constituent, named Paul, is non-verbal and suffers from severe scoliosis. Every day of Paul's working life he travelled by bus to a disability services and support organisation in Warabrook. This was both a workplace and a source of social interaction for Paul. Paul's mother, Lynne, has spent a long time getting Paul into the habit of catching this bus. Unfortunately, in order for Paul to get to work after the changes to the routes and timetable, he would have had to catch a number of buses. Lynne was forced to drive Paul to work and pay for him to be picked up.

The overhaul of Newcastle Transport bus routes and timetables also saw a significant increase in reports of school students being stranded in the Charlestown electorate and others forced to navigate much longer and often more dangerous journeys home. Some were left waiting at interchanges for over an hour as a result of the changes.

Sarah contacted my office because the changes to the routes and timetable seriously impacted her ten-year-old daughter. She and other students travelled out of area each morning to an Opportunity Class, and while the journey to school was not significantly disrupted by the changes her journey home was made significantly more difficult. In order to catch the same bus home, she was required to cross a road with no pedestrian crossing, and poor visibility for pedestrians. Furthermore, she and her fellow students would have to leave school ten minutes early to make the connection.

As a parent, Sarah was understandably very uncomfortable with this option and told me that her daughter was very concerned. There was an alternate route available, which again would have

required Sarah's daughter to cross a busy intersection in order to make a connecting service, and also forced her make the difficult decision to leave school early or catch a later bus and get home after 5p.m. every afternoon. These changes had a considerable impact on Sarah's family, she told me she was worried she would have to purchase a second car and to change her work availability.

Unfortunately, these disruptive changes were only the beginning for Charlestown residents.

Further changes were implemented in June 2019, which saw cuts to three key fixed-route services servicing my electorate: the 41, 43 and 48 routes. The routes, which serviced the suburbs of Redhead, Whitebridge, Dudley, Gateshead, Windale, Warners Bay, Eleebana, Mount Hutton, Charlestown, Tingira Heights, Belmont North, Valentine and Floraville, were reduced from an hourly service to a two-hourly service in non-peak times. The 48 was the only route to service the suburbs of Whitebridge, Dudley and Redhead, while the 43 was the only route to service Tingira Heights and Floraville.

Without consultation, the private operator took the decision to roll out On-Demand services which cease at 4pm weekdays at the expense of these key fixed route services. This left Redhead, Dudley and Whitebridge residents with no public transport options leaving their suburb after 6:15p.m. on a weekday and 6:36p.m. on a weekend. It also meant that the latest time a Redhead, Dudley or Whitebridge resident can leave the Newcastle CBD on a weekday or Saturday in order to get home is at 05:14pm.

The On-Demand system also disproportionately impacted people living with disabilities and the elderly, who were more likely to be unable to utilise the technology required to keep track of these bookings. The service has proven unreliable for appointments, as it will only drop people at a nearby 'connecting' bus stop so they can connect to a fixed-route service to get to their destination. The arrival 'window' in relation to time and location of pick-up can vary greatly, with buses commonly having to re-route and adjust pick-up location, leaving commuters stranded if they do not have the phone app which shows the real-time bus location.

However, it is not just the changes to routes and timetables and the imposition of less-effective and less-reliable alternative methods of service delivery which have had an impact on Charlestown commuters. There has been a loss of basic infrastructure which has undermined our communities and the opportunity for their growth. This was best illustrated by an elderly couple, who wrote to me saying:

We recently moved to Redhead and chose this location because of the services provided as we are retirees & as the years pass will become more & more dependent on public transport. We chose a home on a flat block only a 200 metre walk to the bus stop & 300 metre walk to the local shops. For bus services to be cut to our community which contains a large percentage of retirees will be devastating for us.

In the lead-up to the privatisation of Newcastle Buses, the Minister for Transport repeatedly insisted that services would improve because the private provider had a financial incentive to improve them and in doing so attract more public transport users. While I am not suggesting that all of the changes to the network brought about by the private provider were negative, the experience of the Charlestown electorate indicates that the reality of a private provider being given control of a service like public transport creates a perverse incentive to improve services by sacrificing those needed by a smaller but more vulnerable cohort in order to cut costs while still appealing to a wide enough user base.

Ultimately, the people of Charlestown and surrounding electorates were not afraid to be vocal about their opposition to both the sale of Newcastle Buses and the roll-out of changed routes and timetables. My colleagues from the electorates of Newcastle, Wallsend, Swansea and I were collectively able to present petitions totalling more than twenty thousand signatures for debate in the NSW Parliament. While the Government was unwilling at that stage to listen to the viewpoints of our communities, I am pleased that the Committee has commenced this inquiry and invited submissions from those who have experienced the fallout of public transport privatisations in the past.

Yours sincerely



JODIE HARRISON MP

Member for Charlestown