

**Submission
No 40**

**INQUIRY INTO CURRENT AND FUTURE PUBLIC
TRANSPORT NEEDS IN WESTERN SYDNEY**

Organisation: BusNSW

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NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 6 – Transport and the Arts Inquiry into the Current & Future Public Transport Needs in Western Sydney

Submission by BusNSW – 18 September 2023

Introduction

BusNSW is the peak body for the NSW private bus and coach industry. Our members provide essential services and are a key interface with the travelling public. BusNSW's mission is to foster the efficient and sustainable growth of public transport in NSW, and to promote the benefits of bus and coach travel.

BusNSW members provide bus services under Transport for NSW contracts in Sydney metropolitan and outer-metropolitan areas, and in NSW rural and regional areas. They also provide “non-contracted” services in the *Long Distance, Tourist and Charter* (LDTC) sector.

Executive Summary

Buses play a vital role in delivering public transport in NSW and, during the 2021-22 financial year, carried more than 157 million passengers. This represents approximately 44 percent of total public transport patronage. As will be outlined in our submission, the need for buses in Western Sydney is essential, with buses the only available form of public transport in large parts of Western Sydney. Despite this, service coverage and frequency in parts of Western Sydney is lacking and there are opportunities for improvement.

Our submission argues that buses are the fastest and most effective method of combating public transport disadvantage in Western Sydney. Unlike, heavy and light rail, which take many years to plan and implement (causing traffic and community disruption), buses offer maximum flexibility. Their ability to operate at short notice along a myriad of routes and with a minimum of infrastructure spending, and their capacity to carry a variable passenger load make buses an ideal solution for the range of transport needs in Western Sydney. How this can be achieved is described in more detail below.

(a) Availability and Accessibility of Public Transport Services:

In recent years, planning for Sydney has embraced the idea of a Sydney metropolis of three cities: the *Eastern Harbour City*, a *Central River City* and a *Western Parkland City*. The purpose of dividing Sydney in this way is to plan for the creation of cities where people can live within 30 minutes of travel to jobs, education, health facilities and other services. BusNSW commends this vision, however, while the *Eastern Harbour City* is close to achieving (some would argue, has already achieved) this goal, the *Central River City* (Greater Parramatta, Westmead, Camellia,

Rydalmere, Silverwater, Auburn and Olympic Park) and *Western Parkland City* (Liverpool, Greater Penrith Campbelltown-Macarthur and the new Western Sydney Airport) lag far behind.

Western Sydney has seen improvements in connectivity, with the expansion and planning of Sydney Metro lines (Northwest and West), and the integration of buses with rail services in key transport hubs like Parramatta, Penrith, and Liverpool, improving access to commercial centres. However, there are still gaps in services, particularly in areas with lower population densities and limited or no rail connections. As noted in the recent interim report by the *NSW Bus Industry Taskforce*,

“In large parts of west and south-west Sydney... buses are the only available form of public transport – and service coverage and frequency are poor.”¹

Ironically, it is the areas of Sydney that are experiencing the greatest population increase and which are the most socioeconomically disadvantaged, that have the poorest public transport access. In areas of Sydney’s Greater West, few bus routes operate more than 45 services per day and many others have less than 12-hour coverage over the course of a day.

By contrast, over two thirds of Greater Sydney’s bus patronage occur in the area defined as the *Easter Harbour City* (from Hornsby in the north, through the Sydney CBD, Inner West and Sydney Airport precinct to Sutherland in the south). These areas of Sydney which are the most established and affluent often have bus routes with upwards of 200 services per day, including services with all-day and overnight coverage.²

In short, there is a huge discrepancy in the availability and accessibility between Sydney’s east and west. This discrepancy means that buses are simply not a viable option for many in Sydney’s West, despite the obvious economic and environmental advantages of public transport as compared to private vehicle ownership.

The introduction of *Bus Rapid Transit* (BRT) interconnected with local bus services would provide residents in Sydney’s west improved and efficient public transportation options, enhancing connectivity, accessibility and mobility. BRT is a high-capacity public transportation system that combines the efficiency of light rail with the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of buses. It differs from regular bus services by featuring dedicated lanes, priority signalling, modern stations, and frequent service, offering faster and more reliable travel for passengers.

BusNSW notes that in the lead up to the election, the Labor party committed to *Bus Rapid Transit* links between Campbelltown, Liverpool and Penrith to the new airport and the city of Bradfield (under construction) based on the *Western Sydney City Deal*. A commitment to eighty locally made buses and the conversion of Fifteenth Avenue into a rapid transit corridor were also made, translating to an investment of \$305 million over three years.

There is a need to secure funding for the *Bus Rapid Transit* routes to ensure people in nearby areas who work at the new airport will have viable public transport options. Liverpool and other parts of Western Sydney will simply be too far from the Metro rail (Western Sydney Airport Line) to be able to consider it as an alternative.

¹ First Report, NSW Bus Industry Taskforce, July 2023, p. 12

² NSW Bus Industry Taskforce, op.cit, pp.32-33

In summary, to increase patronage and achieve the vision of dwellings in Western Sydney being within 30 minutes of a strategic centre, bus services and bus priority infrastructure such as bus lanes, are urgently needed. To achieve that, a fairer distribution of the state public transport budget is needed to support bus services. There is a need to consider:

- End-to-end journeys, particularly where rail is non-existent,
- Local trips that are currently not well serviced (e.g., shorter journeys to shops, hospitals and other amenities),
- Regions or routes where off-peak services are sub-optimal (e.g., late evening services for shift and essential workers),
- First and Last Mile transport to/from transport hubs and customers' homes (or close to home), including on-demand bus services.

(b) Current and Anticipated Levels of Demand:

Western Sydney is a vast and diverse geographical area which continues to experience significant population growth. As the population continues to grow, so will the demand for public transport.

The *Western Parkland City* will account for over 20 per cent of NSW's population growth by 2036, with nearly 1.39 million people. To keep pace with this growth, the *Western Parkland City* may require 15-30 per cent of the NSW infrastructure spend – the equivalent of \$60 billion – \$120 billion in today's terms – over the next 15 years³. When this is broadened to the entire Western Sydney, the scale of the public transport challenge can be appreciated.

Current demand for public transport in Western Sydney is substantial, with many commuters relying on it for daily travel. Anticipated population growth added to socio-economic disadvantage, means that demand is likely to increase. However, many growth areas in Western Sydney have witnessed zero or little increase to public transport service levels in recent years due to funding constraints. Public transport in the area is simply not frequent and efficient enough to be a compelling alternative to private travel. This trend needs to change. To meet future demand, improve current experiences and encourage uptake, public transport services must be expanded, improved, and made more efficient.

BusNSW supports the prioritisation of long-term growth funding for underserved communities and corridors in the west. BusNSW would like to see a better correlation between population growth / density changes and increased bus services. Closer collaboration between government, bus operators and the community (who possess local knowledge about Western Sydney) will also result in a better allocation of the available budget to services that meet local transport needs.

As part of the strategy to meet future demand, arrangements to house the additional buses required to secure the needs of the growing population should be addressed. Identifying and allocating strategic parcels of land in Western Sydney that can be acquired or leased is critical to the long-term planning of bus services and need for additional depot capacity to support growth. Planning should also consider access to adequate power from the grid and the infrastructure required to transition to zero emission buses.

³ Western Sydney Parkland City Blueprint, Oct 2022, p.2

A *Western Parkland City* bus interchange should be implemented as part of the improved bus connections between Western Sydney Airport, Liverpool, Penrith and Campbelltown-Macarthur. Similarly, feeder bus services should be implemented as part of (rather than after) the development of new rail lines.

(c) Changing Nature of Public Transport Needs:

Demographic shifts occurring both within Western Sydney and across Australia, are likely to impact public transport needs. Western Sydney's population is becoming more diverse, leading to a variety of public transport needs, not simply the home-work commute, but for a range of social and educational purposes. At the same time, the population across Australia is aging which will require more accessible and comfortable public transport options.

These shifting demographics, the development of new suburbs, the construction of the Western Sydney International airport, other planned infrastructure projects (e.g., Sydney Metro West and Western Sydney Airport), and increased population density are reshaping public transport needs. These developments require careful planning to ensure efficient public transport integration.

The provision of rail services requires extensive planning and investment and offers limited flexibility. By contrast, the provision of bus services is fast, affordable and adaptable to changing community needs. It can fill a current needs gap and evolve as required to service a burgeoning population. BusNSW believes the NSW Government and industry can collaborate to achieve some “quick wins” by identifying and implementing high frequency bus corridors for Western Sydney.

Higher frequency public transport services need to be married with sensible and adaptive public transport policy for the vision of “*thirty-minute cities*” in Western Sydney to be achieved. This requires commitment by government, recurrent funding, and the alignment of public transport with changes to population and community needs.

As new neighbourhoods are planned to cope with increasing housing demand in Western Sydney, there is a need to ensure people have access to their local and neighbouring communities. This should include the early introduction of new bus routes and 15-minute walking, cycling and micromobility networks at the time residents move in. Investing early in public transport access in and around new local centres will support the emergence of sustainable travel culture.

When planning new suburbs, prioritising road space for more efficient vehicles is critical and should ensure local streets are suitable for the operation of 12.5 metre long buses and coaches. It can reduce the number of private vehicle trips and improve the liveability of communities. A standard bus requires the same road space as three cars but can carry more than 60 people. Dedicating more road space and signal prioritisation for buses improves journey times, efficiency, and the reliability of public transport. The inclusion of bus-only links can provide more direct routes compared with general traffic, reducing journey times, and increasing public transport appeal and patronage.

Another aspect of the Western Sydney transport equation that is often ignored is coach access to and from Western Sydney to cater for both domestic and international tourists. Once opened,

the new Western Sydney Airport will need to be serviced by coaches carrying passengers to and from Central Sydney and other tourist destinations in Greater Sydney and regional NSW.

The provision of parking for coaches, at the new Airport, within the Sydney CBD and at Western Sydney attractions such as Katoomba, is critical. Like rapid bus corridors, the movement of coaches has triple bottom line benefits. Coach access to set down and pick up passengers and coach parking across Western Sydney needs to be improved significantly. BusNSW believes that coach travel and its role in the NSW visitor economy needs to be considered in this public transport Inquiry.

(d) Social, Economic, and Planning Impacts:

There is a need to change the current focus on planning for Western Sydney. In past decades, the focus in Western Sydney (and new communities more generally) has been on providing communities with residential housing before jobs, transport and services are delivered. This has led to housing developments lacking the infrastructure required to meet current and future public transport needs. There is a need for a fundamental shift away from this approach with infrastructure, including for public transport, to be built concurrently with housing.

A higher population density in key areas of Western Sydney necessitates more frequent and efficient public transport services. Land-use policies should encourage transit-oriented development to maximize public transport utilisation. BusNSW notes that section 75AC of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act* requires planning decisions for Greater Sydney to consider social and environmental, as well as economic, concerns.

Excessive car dependency runs contrary to planning goals. The current reliance on cars in Western Sydney due to limited public transport options, contributes to congestion, air pollution, and increased infrastructure costs. Infrastructure decisions that prioritise car travel over public transport in turn lead to unequal access to job opportunities, education, and essential services, thereby exacerbating social inequality.

Bus lanes and signal priority at intersections provide bus customers with quicker and more reliable journey times, greater customer satisfaction and increased public transport mode share. Guidelines and policies for new State and local streets and roads should include bus priority.

By contrast, public transport, and in particular, high frequency bus services, can help achieve social and environmental goals. A vision of *Bus Rapid Transit*, serviced by zero emission vehicles and with connections to (heavy) rail stations where these exist, and community and business hubs when they do not, should be an integral part of the “*Three Cities*” concept.

However, contracted regular passenger and school bus services are not the only public transport requiring development. There should also be a focus on the provision of long distance, tourist and charter services by buses and coaches in Western Sydney.

(e) Affordability:

Affordability is a critical factor in determining the success of public transport in Western Sydney. The recent interim report by the *NSW Bus Industry Taskforce* identified west and south-west Sydney as having the highest levels of socioeconomic disadvantage in Greater Sydney and even

the state.⁴ Western Sydney also has a preponderance of disadvantaged groups in the community.

Western Sydney has the highest number of Aboriginal people of any region in Australia.⁵ It also has large numbers of people with disabilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people who are unemployed, single parent households and a growing number of people in the private rental market.⁶ This is in marked contrast with the *Eastern Harbour City*, which not only has lower rates of poverty, but existing rates of poverty have declined in recent times.⁷

In short, those areas with the greatest need for reliable, affordable public transport are those with the poorest levels of service. This needs to change. As outlined earlier, BusNSW considers that the following actions are critical here:

- The development of rapid bus corridors, particularly in areas of Western Sydney not currently serviced by trains.
- The allocation of growth bus funding for areas of Sydney where public transport options are poor.
- A correlation between population growth / density changes and an increase in bus services.
- Close Government collaboration with bus operators and the community in Western Sydney to identify urgent public transport needs.

BusNSW appreciates that the distances (kilometres) an average bus route would cover in Western Sydney would be larger as compared to higher density areas like Inner Sydney, and that consequently the cost effectiveness of providing services in the region are generally lower. However, we believe there is a need to ensure that fares are attractive to lower income earners to promote a mode shift from private vehicle use.

The *Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal* (IPART) is a government agency in NSW, responsible for regulating prices, charges, and services in various sectors, including public transport. IPART plays a crucial role in setting and reviewing public transport fares to ensure they are fair, reasonable, and sustainable for both passengers and transport operators in the region.

The NSW Government also has a role in ensuring the affordability of fares, through determining fare structures, pricing policies, and subsidy levels for public transport services in the state. This includes decisions on fare increases or reductions, concessions for specific groups (e.g., seniors, students), and funding allocations to support affordable and efficient public transport options.

The NSW Government's Opal Next Generation Ticketing System project provides an opportunity to consider the affordability of fares. BusNSW understands the upgrade includes integrating Opal cards into a digital wallet and developing a Mobility-as-a-Service app, known as *Opal Plus*. The investment is intended to deliver a connected and personalised 'plan, book and pay'

⁴ First Report, NSW Bus Industry Taskforce, July 2023, page 12

⁵ Western Sydney Parkland City Blueprint, p.

⁶ NSW Bus Taskforce, pp.12-13

⁷ NCOSS 2023 Mapping Disadvantage in NSW

experience across public and private modes of transport throughout Greater Sydney and outer metro.

Together, IPART and the government can and should factor in the social and environmental benefits of bus travel and work to ensure public transport is an affordable option for the people of Western Sydney.

(f) Role of Public Transport and Future Technologies:

Public transport, including buses, plays a central role in reducing car dependency. Future transport technologies, such as zero emission buses, semi-autonomous vehicles, and real-time data integration can increase the attractiveness of public transport. These technologies are either already here or on their way.

TfNSW estimates that all government contracted buses within Sydney will complete the transition to zero emission by 2035. Transport for NSW has developed a *Connected and Automated Vehicle (CAV) Readiness Strategy* to prepare for the safe and effective deployment of CAVs on NSW roads. An upcoming On-road CAV Bus Trial will be the first trial of connected and autonomous systems on-board a full-sized, passenger-carrying, zero-emissions bus in NSW.

Liverpool Council's project, the *Fifteenth Avenue Smart Transit Corridor* aims to deliver a high quality public transport link between the Liverpool CBD and Western Sydney International Airport. Under the *Western Sydney City Deal*, the NSW Government is supporting a rapid bus connection between the Airport, the new Aerotropolis and Liverpool's CBD in time for the airport's opening in 2026. The project proposes a *Trackless Tram System* which is an emerging transit technology that offers considerable advantages as compared to Light Rail Transit as a mid-tier transit solution – between bus systems and heavy rail. These include the much lower cost and minimal disruption to implement.

While these are exciting developments, today's commuters cannot wait for new technologies to be made available. Any new technology will be subject to a comprehensive set of measures and protocols to safeguard the well-being of commuters and maintain the highest standards of safety.

Improved public transport service levels can be implemented in the short term. As outlined earlier, high frequency bus corridors can overcome public transport disadvantage in Western Sydney. This holds true irrespective of what energy source is used to power, or what other new technology is integrated into the bus.

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) alongside local bus services is a well-established and adaptable solution capable of incorporating emerging technologies as they evolve. It is also an attractive solution to commuters, as evidenced by the utilisation of the Northern Beaches B-line – if BRT is built, the community will use it.

(g) Role of Public and Private Sectors:

Both the public and private sectors have important roles to play in improving public transport in Western Sydney. State Governments provide the funding to enable public transport (including buses) to operate. The NSW Government contracts private public transport providers (bus, ferry and light rail) or provide the service directly (Sydney Trains, NSW Trains). Without state funding, public transport would cease to function.

Local Government also plays a vital role. Generally, buses travel on roads owned and managed by local councils. Similarly, some of the interchanges, bus stops and other infrastructure used by buses are owned and managed by local government. Often, councils lack the funds to invest in infrastructure to the extent required, and such public transport investment competes with other priorities in local government budgets. Greater financial assistance is needed from both federal and state governments to allow councils to fulfil their transport infrastructure mandate. Collaboration with local government by state and federal authorities is crucial to fund major public transport projects.

BusNSW supports transit-orientated development planning in Western Sydney to maximise the opportunity for consumers to use public transport to access their work, living and leisure activities. Similarly, this type of planning often provides the infrastructure that makes living in proximity more desirable which in turn causes property prices to rise. Government has an opportunity to consider options to capture the value from some of this increase.

Bus layovers can improve the reliability and efficiency of bus services while providing drivers with better facilities for meal and rest breaks. An example of this is the new state-of-the-art layover at Sunnyholt Road and Gordon St, Blacktown. This bus layover supplements existing layover facilities at Blacktown Interchange, enabling more efficient scheduling of meal breaks and positively supporting bus driver wellbeing with modern amenities to enjoy their breaks and refresh for the next part of their shift. The layover was built under the NSW Government's *Bus Priority Infrastructure Program*. BusNSW recommends that the NSW Government investigate other opportunities for new bus layovers to be built in Western Sydney.

In terms of the private sector, as of late 2022 all bus services within the Greater Sydney region (and indeed, NSW) are delivered by private companies under Transport for NSW contracts. Under these contracts, the government retains control or ownership of the bus assets and has responsibility for planning and approving bus services (including routes, timetables and bus stops).

BusNSW believes there is room for improvement here, and that the contracted operator is best placed to recommend service variations within its area of operation, including Western Sydney. Public-private partnerships can bring innovation and service quality improvements; however, bus operators need more effective ways of working with Transport for NSW to implement innovative solutions as customer needs change and grow. Contracting models should prioritise performance-based agreements to ensure service excellence.

The installation of infrastructure for the charging of electric buses in depots will significantly impact the hard stand area and the leasing and redevelopment options for owners. Consideration should therefore be afforded to the commercial arrangements between government and operators to manage the ongoing ownership and availability of depot infrastructure to support a zero emission bus network. BusNSW recommends that the NSW Government undertake a review of long-term bus depot needs and access arrangements, including the development of depot standards, consideration of requirements to support the transition to zero emissions (battery electric and hydrogen fuel cell), and preparation of a case for adequate funding.

(h) Staffing and Future Workforce Planning:

Anticipating population growth and increased demand for public transport necessitates workforce planning. Adequate staffing levels, skills development, and retention strategies are crucial to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of public transport services.

The bus industry has one of the oldest workforces in Australia. In NSW, the average age for bus drivers is 57 years of age. Unsurprisingly, many of these drivers are now retiring from the industry, while many others left during the COVID-19 pandemic and simply did not return. The bus and coach industry is highly dependent on human resources, however the recruitment of bus and coach drivers has not kept pace with the rate of drivers leaving the industry.

Based on data provided by *Transport for NSW (TfNSW)*, the number of current *Bus Driver Authorities (BDA)* reduced by approximately 11% in the two-year period to Quarter 1 2022. This meant that over 3,000 employees were removed from the pool of available drivers. This in turn has resulted in operators, in both metropolitan and regional areas, experiencing a critical shortage of bus and coach drivers.

BusNSW believes that the whilst the issue of bus driver shortages needs to be addressed, the introduction of additional bus services in Western Sydney would provide opportunity for people to find stable full-time jobs, close to home. It also provides opportunities for individuals without a university education to obtain qualifications in a relatively short period of time and start a life-long career in the industry as a driver or other support staff.

Action is needed both to recruit younger drivers and to retain drivers already in the industry. Competitive wages and benefits, as well as a supportive work environment, can improve retention rates. Driver facilities such as toilets (including female toilets) and other amenities need to be provided away from the depot, since most of the driver's shift is spent 'on the road'. The owners of amenities have an important role to play with support from the NSW Government. BusNSW previously recommended that the NSW Government conduct a full review of bus driver meal and toilet facilities at bus layover locations in Western Sydney and implement an improvement plan. The *NSW Bus Industry Taskforce* has since recommended a full audit of driver facilities at depots, layovers and other stopping places and BusNSW fully supports this.

Training and skill development programs should be implemented, both to enhance service quality and to encourage more people into the industry. BusNSW supports a review of bus driver training arrangements and funding opportunities. To that effect, BusNSW has supported the development of a minimum driver "skill set" as part of a pre-vocational training. Government funding through programs such as *Smart and Skilled* is required to support this type of training.

BusNSW has been liaising with TAFE NSW regarding the development and delivery of literacy and numeracy type training for bus drivers that come from a non-English speaking background. The training is intended to develop driver communication skills and assist them when dealing with members of the public, their peers and supervisors. It is also felt that the training will help bus operators retain drivers.

Equally important is the development of an "electric ready" workforce able to meet the needs of a zero-emission future. There is need for the development of accredited training qualifications and pathways for mechanics and workshop staff to address the safe handling of high voltage

systems for electric buses. Broader training is also necessary to develop the new skills required to address changes to business practices and work health and safety, particularly for bus drivers, operational staff and contractors.

BusNSW recognises the funding of fee-free micro skills courses provided by TAFE NSW in *Electric Vehicle Baseline training* and encourages the government to continue to fund this and other training to ensure an “electric ready” workforce. The *Smart and Skilled Program* could again be used to provide funding to help workers in NSW acquire the skills needed to drive, maintain and operate ZEBs.

(i) Other Related Matters – Major Events, Tourism and Infrastructure

Major events and tourism are an important part of any future transport planning for Western Sydney. Western Sydney currently houses significant sporting precincts, including Olympic Park, Parramatta Stadium, the Sydney International Regatta Centre, Sydney International shooting Centre and the Sydney International Equestrian Centre. These, combined with other major patronage attractors like Sydney Zoo and Western Sydney Parklands require easy access to public transport services. These venues host major events which require efficient and effective public transport. BusNSW supports the planning and implementation of major event bus routes for these precincts.

There are increasing demands on kerbside space and bus/coach layover areas, and a policy for the consistent management and allocation of space is needed. This problem has been steadily growing over recent years and the role of tourist and charter services in moving school, sporting, social and seniors groups is often not recognised in infrastructure planning. The provision of on and off-street parking for buses and coaches is vital for the promotion of tourism and when managed effectively has a positive impact on the environment and the economy. Vehicle access, parking and infrastructure to pick up and set down passengers at Western Sydney venues should be a priority for the NSW Government.

BusNSW recommends that the NSW Government update guidelines for all significant state infrastructure projects to ensure that bus and coach access, parking and lay-over requirements are considered prior to approval of the project. Where major projects fall within the authority of local government, planning regulations should be amended to require similar consideration.

(j) Other Related Matters - Future Transport Models

Buses will play an important part in future transport models. This may include *Mobility as-a-Service* (MaaS) subscription services, where users pay a fee to access a range of transport services, including ride, bike and car sharing and on-demand buses, as well as core mass transit services.

BusNSW understands that Transport for NSW has a vision to enable a vibrant, open mobility marketplace and will be piloting an app known as *OpalPlus* that will enable passengers to purchase a prepaid weekly or weekend subscription for 'journey bundles'. Buses providing fixed route and on demand services will play an integral role in any MaaS framework.

BusNSW recommends that the NSW Government work with BusNSW and bus operators to ensure that buses play a key role in the development of any future transport models that will benefit the Western Sydney community.

Conclusion

BusNSW commends the Inquiry into Public Transport Needs in Western Sydney. BusNSW would welcome the opportunity of working more closely with the NSW Government to improve public transport options within Western Sydney. As outlined in this submission, the development of high frequency bus corridors has the potential to overcome the current public transport disadvantage experienced by Western Sydney. BusNSW believes that close engagement and partnership with industry is the most effective way of instituting these changes and delivering the solutions that Western Sydney needs.