Re-engaging Public Transport Customers

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ABOUT ROADS AUSTRALIA

Roads Australia (RA) is the peak body for roads within an integrated transport system, representing an industry that contributes $207 billion annually to the economy and supports 1.3 million jobs.

RA brings industry, government and communities together to lead the evolution of Australia's roads, integrated transport and mobility.

The nation's only roads champion, RA's 150+ members includes all of Australia's road agencies, major contractors and consultants, motoring clubs, service providers and other relevant industry groups.

RA's current policy focus extends across five activity streams: Safety; Capacity; Transport Reform; Journey Reliability; and Sustainability with Diversity and Inclusion an underlying commitment across each stream.

Register for upcoming policy events to contribute to the debate.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen rapid changes to Australia's road network and public transport usage. 'Stay home' directives across Australia saw road congestion and public transport patronage plummet.

As we move out of this pandemic, and travel into a 'new normal' where regular activities resume, it is likely that customer behaviour on public transport will be significantly changed from pre-pandemic patterns. There is a need to ensure public transport remains a critical link in the transport ecosystem and it will be important to engage customers to return safely and confidently to public transport.

EVENT SUMMARY

Over 160 attendees joined RA's webinar on 6 August 2020 to hear a keynote presentation from **Alana Newbrook**, General Manager—Advisory, WSP, highlighting key outtakes from the recently released white paper "COVID-19 & Public Transport: From Response to Recovery".

Responses were presented by:

- **Adam Berry,** COVID-19 Taskforce Lead, Transport for NSW; and

- **William Tieppo,** Deputy Secretary – Network Integration, Department of Transport Victoria.

Speaker presentations are available on the RA website.

This is the second in a series of webinars focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on mobility. RA has released Policy Insights for the first event, MaaS: opportunities and threats posed by COVID-19 as well as a Road Work podcast to continue the discussion.

The webinar was moderated by Aneetha de Silva, Journey Reliability Policy Stream Chair, RA and Managing Director, Government - Australia & New Zealand, Aurecon and sponsored by WSP.

KEY INSIGHTS

Ms Newbrook presented on WSP's white paper, released on 28 April 2020. The paper builds on discussions around the impacts of COVID-19 on transport demand, focusing on capacity considerations, and what adjustments to services and travel patterns will be needed as restrictions are lifted and Australian states and territories transition to a 'new normal'.

The white paper has been developed for an Australian context, and builds on WSP's earlier work in North America, outlining a framework for assessing the capacity of public transport under different recovery scenarios. Additional papers with a focus on transit operations in Canada, road pricing and tolling (USA) and sustainability and climate change (UK), among others, are available on WSP's website.

The focus of the paper was the state of transition, as Australia moves out of lockdown into the 'new normal'. During this time it is anticipated that there will be progressive easing of restrictions and a range of precautions and monitoring in place with the potential for further lockdowns if needed. This is expected to occur in different times in different locations.

The paper proposed three distancing scenarios, which have now been taken up by a number of transport agencies across Australia. The scenarios include:

- Scenario 1: strict distancing—with seating capacity reduced to allow at least 1.5 metres between customers and no standing.

- Scenario 2: moderate distancing—with seating capacity reduced to ensure no person it sitting directly next to, behind or diagonally across from another person, and standing capacity of at least 1 metre between customers.

- Scenario 3: relaxed distancing—with seating capacity allowing gaps between each customer row and at least 1 metre between customers facing one another. Standing capacity of at least 1 metre between customers.

The scenarios may require public transport to operate at between 9% and 48% of total capacity, with specific issues for different modes with the largest impact on bus, tram and light rail capacity and further knock-on effects for the loading and unloading of public transport vehicles.

Ms Newbrook explained the key considerations during the transition scenario, including:

- Safety: ensuring the safety of frontline staff and passengers is essential, noting that there are safety issues both real and perceived, and additional consideration needed for vulnerable users.

- Consistency: proposals for social distancing are consistent with official advice of 1.5 metres distancing in workplaces—clear logic to approach in the paper to support confidence and perceptions of safety.

- Information: clear and consistent communication is required, with detail on public transport crowding levels provided in advance, and the ability to influence behaviour rather than focus on enforcement.

- New behaviour patterns: monitoring people's willingness to change their behaviour and determining what is the potential for mode shift.

Ms Newbrook highlighted that customer attitudes to public transport have changed and could have a big impact on future patronage. Employers will also play a significant role in influencing the way customers use public transport. As such, the public and private sectors will need to work collaboratively to develop demand management strategies. This could include core working times, shift patterns, end of trip arrangements, locations of workplaces and incentives for different modes, all of which have the potential to reduce demand for public transport (at least during traditional peak times) and increase demand for active transport. It was noted that was already being reflected in recent state and local government investment in permanent and pop-up cycle paths.

Ms Newbrook concluded that the significant changes seen in recent months offer an opportunity to re-assess and re-think what people value. Congestion and emissions have reduced, people have more time to spend with their families and are engaging more with their local places and communities.

Adam Berry, COVID-19 Taskforce Lead at Transport for NSW (TfNSW), responded noting that they saw a drop in public transport trips from 2.5 million trips to low 400,000 per day across Greater Sydney.

Mr Berry explained that TfNSW had developed a 'COVID safe transport plan' for customer return to the network, centred on customer confidence and focusing on:

- Cleaning: on-board cleaning, stations at transit interchanges and end of shift cleaning for vehicles involving over 1,350 new cleaning staff.

- Data: for decision making by customers, ensuring real-time information through open data sources for customer loading, including information by carriage where possible. A restriction of 25% capacity was initially adopted, increasing to 50% capacity.

The focus in NSW has been about education of capacity, rather than enforcement, and today 98.8% of their services stay under COVID safe desired capacity.

Mr Berry highlighted that TfNSW had developed a travel demand management plan in just a matter of weeks in response to the COVID crisis. This resulted in a significantly enhanced service plan comprising 3,500 extra services mostly in off-peak times, with changes to off-peak pricing. Importantly, TfNSW promoted these changes and targeted engagement of major sectors such as universities, industry associations and local government to re-shape their workforce travel plans.

William Tieppo, Deputy Secretary – Network Integration, Department of Transport Victoria (DoT) reflected on the current 'state of disaster' in Victoria. He highlighted the challenges this had imposed in terms of additional travel restrictions and the new curfew, which have had further impact on public transport patronage.

Mr Tieppo explained that despite a drop to patronage at the start of the pandemic, Victoria had committed to running the full timetable of services, which had allowed people to maintain social distance.

During the second lockdown, it was highlighted that Victoria was running more services to help spread peak patronage, provide more choice in terms of available services and ensure customer confidence by helping to facilitate social distancing.

Mr Tieppo explained that an 8pm to 5am curfew in Melbourne had seen Night Network services suspended and services after 8pm reduced. This had resulted in a further 35% drop in patronage from Stage 3 levels, with 4,200 people still touching on to public transport services each night during curfew. Currently public transport is running at 10% of passenger numbers for the same time last year, and road traffic is at 58% of baseline levels. Commuter cycling has seen an 11% increase and foot traffic is up 20%.

Mr Tieppo further explained that DoT were currently working on predictive modelling to ensure they were fully prepared for changes to travel behaviour, which it was noted may continue in the longer-term, such as working from home.

As part of their COVID response, their innovation hub was also investigating (with input from the private sector) ways to reduce congestion as well as providing enhanced information for customers the help better manage their travel choices.

Mr Tieppo concluded by highlighting the key learnings from the Victorian response, which were the importance of having good data, good modelling and good communication.

EVENT OUTPUTS & NEXT STEPS

A snapshot of the event was promoted through RA's LinkedIn channel.

Looking ahead, RA plans to host further policy webinars on this and related topics.