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Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN PRODUCTIVITY OUTCOMES

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's Inquiry into the role of public transport in delivering productivity outcomes.

UnitingCare Australia is one of the nation's largest providers of social services, via a network that employs 35,000 staff, supported by 24,000 volunteers, to more than 2 million people each year in every state and territory at 1,300 sites across remote, regional, rural, and urban areas.

The guiding principles of UnitingCare Australia's work are that all people have:

- intrinsic value;
- physical, spiritual and social needs;
- a just claim to be heard;
- the right to participate in community as fully as they wish and are able; and,
- the right to opportunities that will enhance their life chances and quality of life.

We urge the Inquiry to recognise that public transport is an essential service, particularly for low-income and disadvantaged people. Lack of access to adequate public transport can pose a significant barrier for people seeking full participation in society and the economy, thereby curbing productivity within communities and limiting life choices for individuals and families.

UnitingCare Australia urges all levels of government, led by federal government, to work together to ensure there is adequate planning, research and development and funding for public transport as a vital component in achieving sustainable and equitable productivity outcomes.

The ongoing federal government modus operandi that public transport is a state and territory responsibility, whereas roads attract federal funding, provides a perverse incentive to state and territory governments to favour road projects over public transport infrastructure, for example the East-West Link in Victoria. It is the view of UnitingCare Australia that this division of funding responsibilities constitutes a barrier to productivity.

Together, governments, the community sector and business can ensure that all Australians have adequate access to appropriate modes of transport to ensure full participation in their communities and the economy.

INFRASTRUCTURE FOR FUNCTIONING CITIES

This Inquiry poses the question of investment in infrastructure against investment in public transport and it highlights the relationship between public transport and building well-functioning cities.

Access to affordable and effective public transport infrastructure is particularly important for low income households – public transport is key for access to employment and training, as well as engagement in family and community activities, contributing to productivity and social inclusion.

When considering the hidden costs of a road-dependent transport network – which relies on private car ownership – UnitingCare Australia urges the Inquiry to acknowledge that low-income workers and families often face particular barriers to participation, as well as significant health and safety risks, as they struggle to meet the costs of keeping their vehicles roadworthy, registered and equipped with adequate child restraints.

In recent research undertaken by UnitingCare Australia with clients accessing Emergency Relief and Financial Counselling services, 53% of respondents stated that transport and vehicle costs were amongst the top three items that they could not afford (along with food and energy/utilities).

When people talked about the factors that limited their ability to find and hold work, transportation was given as a key issue. This included the cost and lack of public transport, the high cost of owning and running a vehicle, and the lack of a licence.

Effective public transport, funded with support from the federal Government, is an essential component of well-functioning communities across Australia. It makes economic sense to invest in public transport systems to support the present and future workforce, particularly when hidden costs are considered.

PUBLIC URBAN AND REGIONAL RAIL TRANSPORT

Funding of urban and regional rail services in particular can provide economic, productivity and environmental benefits to the broader community as well as to public transport users, including:

- greater mobility and access to labour force participation for some of Australia's most disadvantaged and vulnerable - including people with disabilities and people who do not or cannot own a private vehicle;
- greater mobility and access to labour force participation for those living in regional and remote areas, particularly when integrated with other public and/or active transport infrastructure;
- less land use required for transport purposes;
- potentially reduced road congestion and a reduced social cost from road accidents; and,
- lower road construction and maintenance costs.

PRIORITISING AND ALIGNING PUBLIC AND ACTIVE TRANSPORT

Support for the infrastructure to make public transport and active transport a viable transport mode in urban, rural and regional areas would be beneficial for productivity, social inclusion and regional development.

The European model of "shared space" could be a starting point for federally funded research and development into integrating public transport and active transport, to offset the current national bias towards private vehicle use, roads and parking that can disadvantage low-income and vulnerable Australians.

Shared space can be defined as a street or area designed to enhance the movement of people by reducing the dominance of motor vehicles and enabling all users to share the space effectively and safely.

A car-dependent transport system can result in cost-shifting, including health and well-being costs, as well as limiting regional economic development and productivity. Policy and funding decisions on public transport should also include reference to deliberate integration with active transport options: walking and cycling.

Integrating public and active transport infrastructure, particularly in regional and rural areas, by means of a public transport system between urban hubs and smaller towns and settlements - supported by options to cycle, walk and/or park and ride for example - would boost productivity and economic development. School, work and training needs should be considering in timetabling to ensure productivity is enhanced not hindered.

A national focus on both public transport and integrating public and active transport could play a key role in alleviating transport disadvantage and car dependency in urban, rural and regional areas of Australia, thereby addressing a significant barrier to workforce participation and access to training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

UnitingCare Australia urges that:

- all levels of government, led by federal government, work together to ensure there is adequate planning, research and development, and funding for public transport as a vital component in achieving sustainable and equitable productivity outcomes;
- the Inquiry recognises that in a road and car-dependent transport system, low-income workers and families face particular barriers to participation as well as significant health and safety risks;
- governments, the community sector and business consult and collaborate on all measures – from funding models to public education programmes – to ensure that all people, regardless of geography or socio-economic status, have adequate access to appropriate transport to ensure full participation in society and the economy; and,
- research and development, policy analysis and funding decisions on public transport include reference to shared space and active transport to more effectively address potential productivity gains.

Yours sincerely

Lin Hatfield Dodds
National Director
UnitingCare Australia

