

## PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

### TRAVEL REPORT

Sally Brindal – Portfolio Holder, March 2021

#### STUDENT TRAVEL SUBSIDY SCHEME

At the 2020 ICPA (WA) State Conference a number of travel motions were presented relating to various aspects of the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme.

**Motions A10, A11 and A14** sought to have ICPA (WA) lobby the Department of Transport – On-demand Transport and the Minister for Transport to review the transport hub policy criteria for the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) – Road Travel Subsidy. These motions were presented as a result of members having applications for the STSS – Road Travel Subsidy for the 2019 school year rejected.

Although there had been no change to the eligibility guidelines, ICPA (WA) highlighted the inequities that were occurring due to On-demand Transport applying the proximity to a transport hub on a strict basis, irrespective of whether the service goes to the nearest public school, how frequent the service operates, or whether the transport goes in the totally opposite direction. ICPA (WA) provided examples from members where claims had been rejected and requested a review into the transport hub policy criteria to more appropriately fit rural travel situations.

One of the objectives of the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme Policy is *‘to alleviate the difficulties associated with access to secondary/tertiary education related transport in regional and remote Western Australia.’*

The following questions were asked of Minister Saffioti:

- How can it be equitable that to be eligible for the Road Travel Subsidy (RTS) there is absolutely no correlation between the closest appropriate government school with boarding facilities and transport to get to that school?
- What is the purpose of the Road Travel Subsidy (RTS) if the eligibility criteria are based on the proximity of government services, such as public transport, if the transport service does not go to the nearest school to where a family lives? The nearest appropriate government school to a family home is the benchmark by which many allowances are based and yet according to the Department of Transport it is not a consideration for the RTS.
- What is the purpose of the RTS if it is not assisting children who live more than 56km from their nearest appropriate government school, with no public transport, to access that school?
- How can it be considered equitable in using the proximity to a transport service as a means of rejecting an application if that transport service goes in the completely opposite direction?

Responses from Ms Veronica Jeffreys, Chief of Staff to Minister Saffioti clearly highlighted that proximity to a transport hub is the determining factor so, utilising mail chimp, a survey was sent to members requesting further information from families who had their 2019 RTS claim rejected. Such information included the details of school location, transport hub location and whether they attend the nearest government school.

The results of the survey highlighted that the greatest number of affected families are those within the Lakes and Eastern District Branches, especially those within the Narrogin High School catchment. The plight of these families, and the inequities of the current system, were also raised with Mr Peter Rundle MLA, The Nationals, and Donna Faragher, Shadow Minister for Education, who raised the issue in the last sitting of Parliament. This is a matter that State Council will continue to pursue.

**Motion A13** was seeking additional discounted fares for students who are required to travel home by air, bus or train at times additional to those already provided for in the STSS Fares Allowance scheme.

The subsidised fare is designed to assist families with the cost of to and from the student's educational institution and travel dates should reflect term/semester dates.

Correspondence received from Ms Jeffrey felt the STSS is sufficiently flexible to enable eligible students to use their entitlements at any time during the school year including travelling home for mid-term breaks, long weekends or other circumstances.

Ms Jeffreys confirmed that the entitlements can be used at any time throughout the school year. The 'within two weeks' requirement only relates to the start and end of the academic year. Although this provided some clarity with regards to the application of the scheme, we have been unsuccessful, so far, in our request for additional discounted fares.

**Motion S1** requested ICPA (WA) lobby the Department of Transport to accept and process requests for refunds for airfares up until 31<sup>st</sup> December.

The current STSS allows for subsidised fares to be accessed using a travel voucher or by requesting a refund. If a family chooses to book and pay for air, bus or train travel rather than applying for a travel voucher, they may apply for a reimbursement, however, completed refund applications for airfares must be submitted no later than one month after the last date of travel on the e-Ticket or tax invoice. The STSS Road Travel Subsidy allows families to remit refund applications for subsidised air, bus or train travel up until the end of the calendar year.

When managing the logistics of secondary students boarding away from home from remote areas, circumstances often change during the year altering the plans of transporting students to and from boarding school. The flexibility of allowing airfare refunds until 31<sup>st</sup> December ensures families are receiving the entitlements the scheme has been designed for.

Ms Jeffrey's response was that the option to request a travel voucher from the Department of Transport (DoT) and incur no out of pocket expenses is available to all families. Additionally, processing refund applications within a specified timeframe allows DoT to meet its financial governance obligations and allows for processing of refunds within a single financial year. It also ensures families receive their refunds as quickly as possible and are not out of pocket for extended periods

**Motion S2** was seeking increased flexibility in relation to where a student flies to and from due to special circumstances such as weather events adverse family logistics when attending camp schools etc.

Currently, when applying for a refund or voucher through STSS, a student is only eligible to submit a request for flights via the most direct route by air/bus/train between the principal family home or usual place of residence and Perth.

ICPA (WA) explained that there are two circumstances that may affect the location a student flies to:

1. Weather events such as flooding and fires may cause road closures between a family home and their nearest airport; however, roads between the family home and an alternative airport may be open, allowing the opportunity for students to fly to the alternative airport.
2. Families in remote areas can travel large distances to access needs and services for a variety of reasons, such as student pick-ups from school camps for younger siblings who attend Distance Education schools, such as School of the Air, and/or medical services.

ICPA (WA) provided an example of how things might occur and requested they investigate this matter and support rural and remote families by offering an element of flexibility to receive a fairer distribution of the benefits of the scheme. A student should be eligible to request a voucher or claim the amount of a fare to their usual place of residence regardless of the location they are flying to.

Ms Jeffrey explained that the primary objective of the STSS is to reduce the amount of time that children are outside parental supervision when travelling between home and educational institutions. DoT is committed to assisting students, in particular, minors travelling alone, to be transported as safely as possible between their home and school. It is therefore a requirement that students travel directly to home or to school rather than to other locations. Any person aware of the practicalities of living in the Defined Remote Area (DRA) of WA would understand this is not always possible.

**Motion F1** sought a review of the eligibility criteria for families in receipt of the AIC Second Home Allowance in relation to accepting the principal place of residence as the address of the claimant rather than the second home address. This would enable those families in the Defined Remote Area of Australia to utilise the STSS Fares Allowance.

A conflict exists between the place of residence eligibility for the AIC Second home Allowance and STSS fares allowance.

Paula Tomkins A/General Manager, On-demand Transport explained the following:

*“Federally funded payments and allowances do not direct how this State-based STSS is administered, however there are a number of payments and allowances provided by the Federal Government that may affect eligibility for the STSS.”*

*A primary objective of the STSS is to limit the amount of time a child spends away from parental supervision (e.g. boarding away from home for extended periods)..... Families who are able to benefit from the Federally funded AIC Second Home Allowance and can therefore spend the entire school year together, are spared the expense of boarding fees that other families living in remote areas on a fulltime basis incur.”*

### **CONVEYANCING ALLOWANCE**

**Motion A12** was raised at State Conference requesting an increase in payment per kilometre for the Public Transport Authority (PTA) Conveyance Allowance.

A conveyancing allowance is paid to a parent/carer to assist in costs of driving their child to and from school or a pickup location. It is a contribution towards the cost of fuel, tyres, repairs and maintenance of a private vehicle, and the amount payable is indexed annually.

ICPA (WA) wrote to John Bailly, School Bus Services outlining that in previous years, the payment per kilometre travelled contributed considerably towards the costs associated with transporting children to school when there is no access to school bus services. However, in the past two years, the cost of fuel and parts to remote areas has meant that this allowance now only contributes a token amount towards the cost families incur in transporting their children to school. An increase to the payment per kilometre would help support rural and remote families accessing an equitable education.

In response Mr John Bailly explained that the PTA were operating under tight budgetary restraints from Treasury. There had been increased costs caused by the pandemic such as additional school bus cleaning. The Transport CPI figure applied every June had decreased by 8.1% although there would be no reduction to the current conveyancing allowance rate of 21.51c. Mr Bailly did suggest we re-raise the issue when things are more normalised

### **COVID-19**

As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly progressed, shortly after our State Conference, State Council was contacted by members concerned about their STSS Fares Allowance travel bookings. In accordance with the guidelines many families had already utilised the travel voucher system to secure travel arrangements (predominately air) for the end of Term 1 on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020. If the Department of Education directed the closure of schools, prior to the end of term, these families would need to make alternative travel arrangements. At least one member had contacted the Department of Transport with regards to the possibility of transferring that voucher to cover the cost of return travel in the event of early school closure. The Department of Transport advised that the travel voucher can only be used on that specific day (9th April). The cost of an alternative day of travel to be borne by the individual. Fortunately, after correspondence from ICPA (WA), On-demand Transport notified ICPA (WA) that, families would be able change their existing flights if students need to return home due to their educational institution or boarding facilities closing and the Department of Transport would cover the cost of changing flights.

With the introduction of regional borders and additional bio-security restrictions in the Kimberley, students from the Kimberley, attending an educational facility in Perth, were initially required to self-isolate for 14 days prior to returning home for the holidays. As a direct result of communications from ICPA (WA) an exemption from the 14 days self-isolation was granted, with applications to be made via the G2G PASS.

Since March 2020, the Department of Transport had been working with Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) participants to support families' travel requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As educational institution and domestic travel schedules returned to normal, the additional supports that had been in place ceased from 1 January 2021. Standard conditions of travel and reimbursement resumed for all travel that is booked on or after 1 January 2021.

All other terms and conditions are also reinstated.

Please familiarise yourself with the requirements of the STSS, which can be found on the Department's [website](#). If you require any further information, please phone 1300 660 147.