

8.1. MM01: Addressing the impacts of bus privatisation

In 2021 the former Coalition State Government privatised bus services on the Lower North Shore and Northern Beaches when it awarded an eight-year contract to operate bus routes serving this locality to private contractor Keolis Downer. Since Keolis Downer commenced operating, local bus routes have been lost, reduced or become increasingly unreliable. Too many routes have been cancelled or scrapped altogether. Those routes that operate are full, late or, too often, cancelled, or buses just never turn up.

On 18 September 2022, the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 6 – Transport published a report on their Inquiry into the Privatisation of Bus Services. The Chair of the Committee wrote in the Introduction to the report:

Public transport is a public good. Its value extends beyond its direct profitability, and goes to the heart of what we value in our society. The people of New South Wales deserve accessible, affordable and reliable public bus services. They have a right to expect that the NSW Government will deliver this public service not just to make a profit, but because it's the right thing for government to do – to empower community mobility and equity.

Private bus operators have a long history in New South Wales. In fact, bus services in some metropolitan and regional communities have only ever, or for many decades, been privately operated. Most companies are family owned and operated, are embedded in their community and responsive to its needs.

Those private bus services were not the focus of this inquiry. This inquiry has taken a critical lens to the transfer of bus services in metropolitan and outer-metropolitan Sydney from the State Transit Authority to private bus operators, most of which are large and multinational companies. The community anger and frustration at the degradation of services is palpable. It is clear to us that the NSW Government's decision to privatise these bus services has been nothing short of a disaster.(p.vii)

The Inquiry found that the privatisation of bus services in Sydney and Newcastle resulted in more limited-service delivery, higher costs for passengers, worse pay and conditions for bus drivers, and that changes to bus services in Sydney and Newcastle - including the location of stops, frequency of services and changes to routes - have at times occurred without comprehensive community consultation.

More than two years after that Inquiry was held, our community remains, rightfully, angry and frustrated as commuters queue for hundreds of metres at Cammeray and Neutral Bay every day. Every day the queues continue, unabated, with children late to school, commuters late for work, and traffic congestion increasing as residents seek alternative travel arrangements.

Since I became Mayor, I have raised concerns with the Minister for Transport in relation to the unreliability of bus services on the Lower North Shore. More recently, I have been inundated by residents beyond angry and frustrated, not only with the buses but with the failure of local State MPs to address the problems their government created. The impact of

the privatised bus services is at crisis point. In a vacuum of any practical action from State Members, Council remains a staunch advocate to the State Government on this important issue for residents, students, and workers.

I therefore recommend:

1. THAT Council notes that the impacts of the privatisation of bus services is an inherited problem for the current State Government that demands urgent action to fix.

2. THAT Council seek an urgent meeting with the Minister for Transport seeking immediate action to:

- i. implement the recommendations of the Inquiry into the Privatisation of Bus Services
- ii. increase services on the Lower North Shore network to meet commuter demand and address delays and queues; and
- iii. review the number of services and routes in the context of increasing demand for public transport from localities such as Cremorne, Neutral Bay, and Cammeray that are solely served by buses and slated for significant density increases under the low and mid-rise housing reforms.

COUNCILLOR ZOË BAKER
MAYOR