



Patronage creeping back

Public transport patronage continues to creep back towards normal, following the historic dip during Victoria's COVID-19 lockdown last winter.

Obviously overall travel demand, and public transport patronage, are heavily influenced by the re-opening of the economy.

On-site workplaces drive work trips, but recreational trips are also now starting to come back as arts and entertainment venues open back up.

While short-term stop-start restrictions have obviously caused travel demand to fluctuate, in recent weeks the number of journeys on public transport has hit about 45% of normal, and is climbing each week.

The return of students to on-site learning prompted growth in February, though the university sector is still missing its

international students – a situation which may not come back to normal for some months yet.

But this recovery is heavily skewed. Anecdotal evidence is backed up by what we are hearing from the operators: peak hour CBD commuting numbers are still weak. But suburban and off-peak travel are getting much closer to pre-pandemic levels.

It's not hard to understand why. White collar CBD workers continue to work from home in large numbers, while those in other types of employment are more likely to need to work on-site.

This ties in with what other cities around the world are experiencing too.

Ben Plowden from Transport For London, interviewed on a recent podcast, said the expectation was a shift in travel demand away

from peak hour commuters and towards off-peak and local trips, and that it was important for the public transport network to adapt to that change.

It's not hard to see a similar trend playing out in Melbourne. (For more on this, [see page 4](#)).

For people to feel confident about using public transport, it's obviously important for it to be as safe as possible. Pleasingly, authorities have continued enhanced levels of cleaning around the system.

There's been a concerted push on messaging relating to use of masks, to encourage everyone to follow the rules to help protect their fellow passengers.

And the government recently launched the "Ridespace" web site which shows crowding levels on trains – [see page 7](#) for more on this.



Contact the PTUA

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PTUA email lists and archived
newsletters online:
ptua.org.au/members/resources

PTUA members can obtain cheap
yearly Myki Passes – see
ptua.org.au/members/offers

PTUA member meetings

Geelong and Ballarat branch
meetings are currently paused.

Other meetings as advertised in
member emails and on our web
site:
ptua.org.au/members/meetings

Rail shutdowns: when works run late

Major rail shutdowns have been a
fact of life recently, thanks to
unprecedented levels of
investment in rail infrastructure.

But two shutdowns have run late
recently, apparently due to
difficulties with signalling.

In December a week-long
shutdown on the Werribee line
ballooned out to four weeks. And
in February a weeklong shutdown
on the Frankston line ended up
being two weeks.

Sources have told the PTUA that
this is part of a regular pattern.
Over-ambitious deadlines and a
lack of staff qualified to complete
commissioning activities for new
sections of track and signalling
are causing the delays.

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New look

Our newsletter and logo have a
new look! Feedback is very
welcome – email us at
office@ptua.org.au

Social media

You can follow us on social media
to stay up to date with public
transport issues in Melbourne
and around Victoria.

Twitter: [@ptua](#)
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Newsletter

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Our thanks to Margaret Pullar
and the dedicated mailout team.

Some delays are not obvious -
they might eat into driver training
time rather than services, and the
train operators find a way to work
around it with minimal delays to
passengers. But in other cases it
disrupts or delays the resumption
of services.

While it's good to see the
government pushing ahead with
rail infrastructure, they must

ensure adequate resourcing and
realistic timelines.

And that means ensuring that
enough new staff are trained on
rail technology to properly
resource the projects, so that
delays of this type are prevented
in future.



Melbourne's first electric bus - but why not more?

PTUA President Tony Morton inspected Melbourne's first plug-in electric bus in January, at the invitation of private operator Transdev.

The electric bus inspection was part of a visit to Transdev's North Fitzroy depot where Dr Morton and committee member Daniel Bowen (by video) were briefed on the company's performance trends and fleet initiatives, and toured the operations control centre.

Members will recall the litany of issues with punctuality and cleanliness that notoriously affected Transdev's bus services around 2017–18 and were documented in a series of media reports at the time, including by ourselves in PTUA News in May 2018.

This visit was in part a showcase

of the changes made since that time, also reflected in the anecdotal reports of improvement - if not yet best practice - from bus passengers themselves.

In acknowledging the substantial improvement that has taken place, it is important to recognise the role played by State government contract reform, with the much greater public oversight enshrined in the new contracts working ultimately for the mutual benefit of passengers, the State and the operator.

But when it comes to the state's first and only electric bus - an initiative funded by Transdev itself - there is a renewed need for the State government to step up on behalf of the people of Victoria. We can now tally up an entire list of cities putting in place all-electric bus fleets.

It may have started with Shenzhen in China but is no

longer confined to that part of the world, with London now boasting 200 electric buses as part of a plan to electrify its entire fleet within 20 years, and other cities from Montreal to Moscow on the path to electrification.

With the substantial progress made worldwide, in just the past five years since the PTUA and the Public Transport Not Traffic campaign featured electric buses in a 2015 Budget submission, Australian cities including Melbourne are now lagging behind.

It beggars belief that while the Victorian government boasts its climate change credentials elsewhere, it sees a need for a 'trial' involving just one bus, at a private operator's own initiative, before committing to any kind of electric bus fleet strategy.



Weekends are the new peak hour – Transport planning in the WFH era

Has it finally happened? For decades ‘telecommuting’ was hailed as the end to both the traditional white-collar CBD office and the journey to work, and yet the rate of working from home hovered at around 5 percent of the workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have changed that seemingly overnight. Months of enforced working-from-home have provided white-collar workplaces with a ready-made experiment to test all that’s been said about remote working.

On the whole, not only do many employees apparently prefer to skip the commute on at least some days each week, it’s been found we are no less productive that way.

As of early 2021 it seems likely most people will settle into a hybrid way of working, going into a regular office some days and not others, or at different times of the day.

What does this mean for urban transport, dominated since the Industrial Revolution by the need to cater for the journey from home to work and back again? If a hybrid WFH model does come to dominate it could mean a welcome rebalancing.

Rather than being overwhelmed by demand in morning and evening ‘peak’ periods on weekdays, travel volumes may follow more consistent patterns through the day as work trips blend in with other purposes.

Most importantly, the all-consuming impulse to expand transport infrastructure to feed peak demand, only to have it induce further travel purely through availability, might itself moderate.

There’s a pessimistic view that a rebalancing of travel patterns away from ‘peaks’ could undermine the role of public transport as people are no longer deterred from car travel by peak-hour road congestion.

But this is to misunderstand what public transport is for: its role needn’t be limited to being supplementary to car dependence, and nor do people need to be deterred from other modes before they’ll use it.

Induced traffic has not gone away: congestion will reassert itself soon enough even if not focussed on traditional peak periods.

The fact that PT patronage has returned to just half its pre-COVID level while car traffic is back at 90% merely reflects how skewed PT patronage, and planning, have been toward peak-hour CBD commuting. Take away the CBD office workers across the entire transport system, and it’s only to be expected that PT will see its overall loading reduce by more, relatively speaking, than the road network.

That the drop in overall PT patronage reflects a change in work habits, not people deserting the system for private cars (through fear of COVID or otherwise), is seen by looking at passenger numbers on weekends.

The weekends, especially the peak shopping times on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, are now anecdotally the busiest on public transport, with loading at similar or higher levels than before the pandemic.

If people were being generally deterred from public transport, the effect would be seen at these times as well - they would be more like weekends in the 1980s, when one would get on a tram in the city and be one of just a handful of people on board.

It appears instead that ‘weekends are the new peak hour’, as a result of travel overall (whether on PT or in cars) now being dominated by shopping and recreational purposes, as much or more than by travel to work.

If true this will bear important lessons for transport planning. This time last year, we at the PTUA foreshadowed that in future the success of a transport system might no longer be measured by how many people could be crammed into a transport corridor during commuter peak hours.

It may now be imperative to reform public transport genuinely into an all-day, seven-day quality service, akin to what people expect of the road system.

This will indeed be necessary to aid recovery from COVID-19 while avoiding a resurgence of traffic congestion that otherwise threatens to overwhelm neighbourhood roads all day every day, and no longer just in peak hour.

Ballarat branch: Upgrade project complete, but more to do

The Ballarat Line Upgrade is finally complete, and the new timetable with increased frequencies was implemented at the end of January.

Broadly these higher frequencies are very welcome, giving people more choice of when to travel throughout the day.

Counter-peak travellers will probably benefit the most, with substantial improvements to the number of trains arriving into Ballarat in the morning and heading back to Melbourne in the late afternoon; people travelling in the early morning or late evening will also have more services to choose from.

However, many peak commuters

have been disappointed to see that their express trains are now stopping at Deer Park and Rockbank, adding several minutes to their travel times – and likely also making it harder to get a seat.

This is a continuation of the biggest remaining problem on the Ballarat line – the need to serve both suburban and regional passengers on the same trains.

It just reinforces that the government can't rest now that the BLU project is done – we need the line to Melton electrified and an express track pair added by 2025, in time for the Melton trains to run into the Metro 1 tunnel.

Melton Station previously had most trains departing from the southern platform, where the station building is, but with the completion of the BLU track

duplications, it's gone to more consistent left-hand running, meaning that most Melbourne-bound trains leave from the northern platform – which has pretty minimal facilities.

This was something that probably should have been addressed as part of the BLU project itself, but nonetheless the government announced a COVID stimulus package of works last year, which includes more seating and shelters, extra entrances, PIDs and partial reconstruction of the platform. The contracts for these works were recently awarded, and construction should begin in March.

With the various projects on the north side of Ballarat Station now well underway, the Victorian Planning Authority and the City of Ballarat are currently doing early consultation on a Master Plan for the south side of the station.

We'd encourage members to let them know your priorities here:

engage.vic.gov.au/ballarat-station-south

In the meantime, there is finally progress on the new bus interchange at Ballarat Station.

It seems that some early works to relocate signalling cables were completed during the final Ballarat Line Upgrade works, and more substantial works should be commencing soon, with the project now slated for completion around the end of July.



Geelong branch: Project details unclear

It has been a year since the Branch was able to hold a meeting, and their resumption is still uncertain.

Reflecting the situation of a number of our regular attendees, online meetings are not an option.

There was surprise when the call for “Expressions of Interest (EOI) for the South Geelong to Waurn Ponds Duplication Project” was recently released by Rail Projects Victoria (RPV).

Although headlined “South Geelong to Waurn Ponds Duplication”, it will not be a full duplication.

Up until now, it has been understood that the duplication would be done in one go, but the EOI revealed that duplication of the section across the Barwon River flood plain has now been pushed back to a “future stage”.

So, almost 2 kilometres of track won't be duplicated. That section will be a bottleneck, although a relatively minor one compared with the current 10 kilometres of single track.

RPV has told us that the extra 8 kilometres of double track permit 20-minute off-peak services.

Currently, the railway runs on a long embankment across the floodplain, with a 180m bridge over the river itself. We note that the EOI mentions a “rail viaduct”.

That suggests that the existing embankment will eventually be replaced by one long bridge,

reducing the barrier to the flow of flood waters. That's a far bigger job than just widening the existing embankment and duplicating the bridge.

As already reported, the decision to re-route some trains via the former direct Werribee corridor, as part of the Geelong Fast Rail project, is curious.

Rail Projects Victoria (RPV) says the move will permit trains to travel between Geelong and Melbourne in an average time of 50 minutes.

But quoting an end to end time of 50 minutes is meaningless. As they should, every train on the Geelong line serves a varying mix of stations. No trains travel non-stop.

Under the current timetable, the quickest train takes only 53 minutes to get to Geelong, having served Footscray, Sunshine, Lara and North Geelong stations along the way.

So how long will a train using the Werribee route take to get to Geelong if it stops at Footscray, Werribee, Lara and North Geelong?

The new track from Werribee to Laverton will be a single line, and

the flow on it will be tidal - up in the morning and down in the evening.

RPV says about 50 percent of peak trains will be sent via the direct line. Off-peak service patterns are not decided, but most services will continue to run via Wyndham Vale.

An indirect benefit of the level crossing removal project is that high-speed running on the Werribee route is more feasible than it was when the RRL was planned.

Despite being more a more "brownfield" site than the RRL, RPV says providing a third track will be easier than quadruplicating the line to Wyndham Vale. It also frees up extra paths on the RRL route through Sunshine.

The handling of trains at Southern Cross is a problem, and RPV is as bewildered as we are by V/Line's peculiar management of services there.

V/Line seems to remain a law unto itself, despite the bureaucratic restructuring of the Transport Department which was supposed to ensure greater integration.



Ridespace: How crowded is your train?

As part of their response to COVID-19, the State Government launched the Ridespace web site, which aims to show crowding information for trains and stations – matched up with realtime departure information.

The idea is that passengers can see how busy the system is likely

to be, and may be able to plan their trips to avoid crowding.

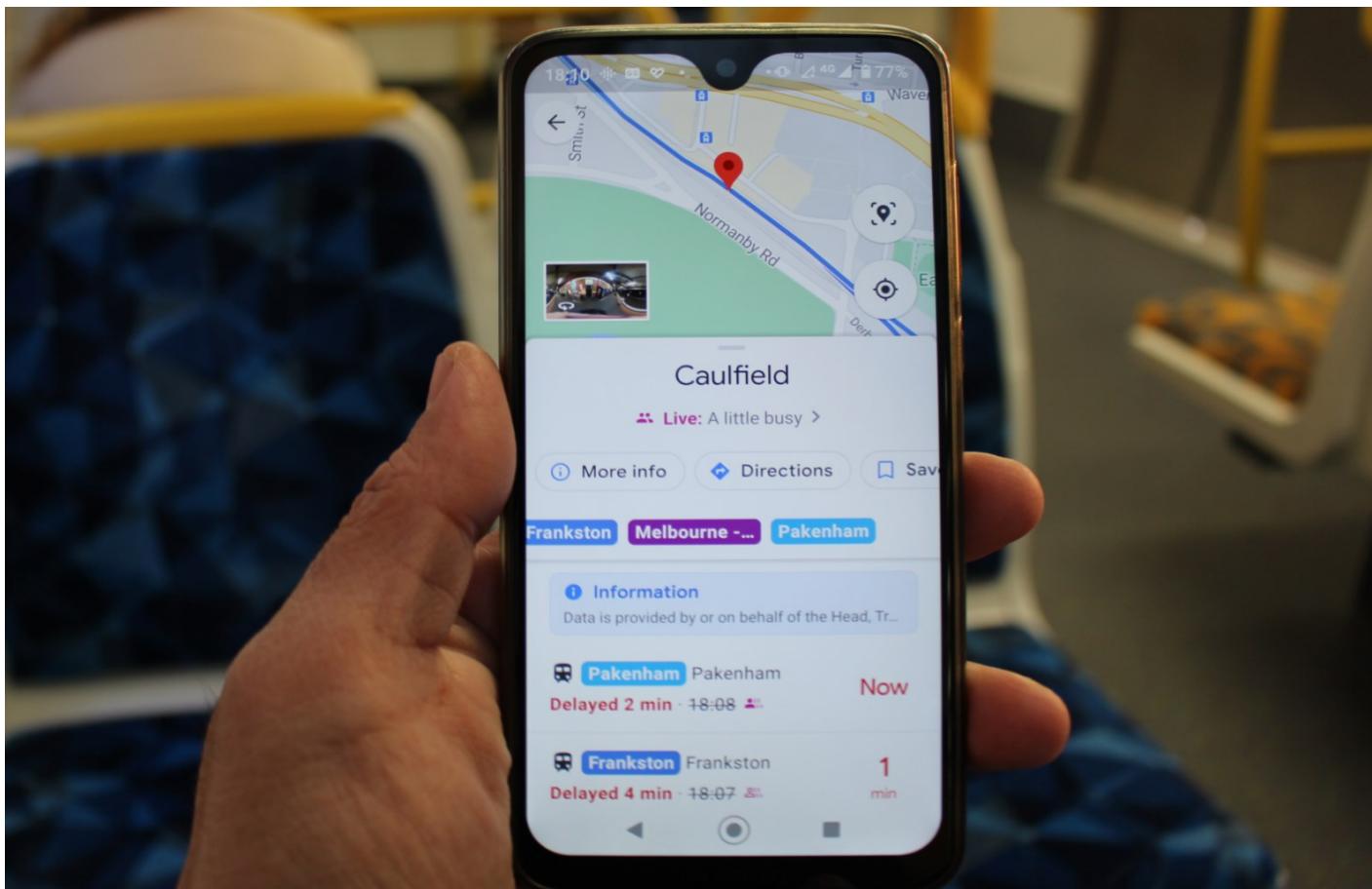
Obviously not everybody can shift their journeys. But those who can will make things easier for those who can't.

The crowding information is based on a combination of live Myki data and historic patronage data.

While the Ridespace information hasn't been made available in the PTV app, it has been added to Google Maps.

PTV tell us that they are hoping to add bus and V/Line crowding information in the future.

ptv.vic.gov.au/more/ridespace



Police trialling assistance app

Victoria Police is trialling an app that allows train passengers to report antisocial behaviour. PTUA members are among those participating in the trial.

Unfortunately Victoria Police is of the view that such an app should

not be used to report incidents requiring an immediate emergency services response. Rather, it is similar to Crime Stoppers, for reporting incidents after they have happened.

We think this is a shame - one of the reasons we are supportive of the concept is that an app (or a text message line) would allow

passengers to report incidents in progress without drawing attention to themselves by making a phone call.

Nonetheless, we hope the trial is successful, and that a potential future upgrade will enable people to use the app when needing an immediate response.

Tram accessibility: time for govt to step up

2021 marks twenty years since the low-floor trams were introduced to Melbourne, with the first Citadis (C-class) tram brought into service in September 2001.

But in twenty years, the progress has been frustratingly slow.

The Auditor General's recent report into tram accessibility (published in October) was clear in its conclusions, noting that: *Tram services are not meeting the accessibility needs of passengers with mobility restrictions.*

The report found that (in 2018-19) only 15% of tram services

delivered a low-floor tram at a level-access tram stop.

This has been an ongoing issue for decades now: the slow rollout of accessible trams is not aligned to the even-slower rollout of accessible tram stops.

The DDA deadline for tram stops is 31st December 2022 - just under two years away. It seems pretty clear that the State government has zero chance of meeting this – but that is not an excuse for not trying.

The trams themselves are faring a little better, with the 2020 State Budget committing to another 100 low-floor trams, helping the fleet move towards compliance.

But with hundreds of trams to be replaced, it will still be some time

before the entire fleet is accessible.

Accessibility means the difference between some people being able to catch a tram, and being cut-off from using the service.

But level boarding helps all passengers, by speeding up loading times for everyone.

It's time for the State Government to push ahead on meeting their DDA obligations.

* * *

The Disability Resource Centre has a petition calling on the State Government to make public transport accessible to everyone. change.org/GetOnTrack



Photo: Claudia Gallois