

**Submission  
No 127**

## **INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT**

**Organisation:** Action for Public Transport

**Name:** Mr Chris Harland

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P.O. Box K606  
Haymarket NSW 1240  
actionforpublictransport@hotmail.com  
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The Committee Manager  
State and Regional Development Committee  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000  
Fax: (02) 9230 3052

To Whom It May Concern:

Inter-regional public transport inquiry

Enclosed is a submission to the inter-regional public transport inquiry, entitled 'Bridging the gap between regional and metropolitan Australia: examining inter-regional public transport.'

This submission makes comment on the specific terms of reference, namely:

- a) How CountryLink services can be improved
- e) How the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased; and
- f) The role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation network.

Relevant background information and recommendations pertaining to these terms of reference have been provided as a result of extensive research into the problems currently facing many regional, rural and remote towns in Australia as a result of inadequate inter-regional public transport.

For any inquiries pertaining to the content of this inquiry, contact Action for Public Transport NSW.

Regards,

Kathryn Church, Chris Harland, Justine Krajewski and Anna Shelly  
*on behalf of*  
Action for Public Transport NSW

State and Regional Development Committee  
Inquiry

Bridging the gap between regional and  
metropolitan Australia: examining  
inter-regional public transport

Prepared by Kathryn Church, Chris Harland, Justine Krajewski and  
Anna Shelly on behalf of Action for Public Transport New South  
Wales (APT NSW)

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## **1. Introduction**

In its current state, inter-regional public transport is inefficient and ineffective in servicing the needs of people within regional communities. This submission will, through exploring the terms of references a), e) and f) within this inquiry, illuminate the flaws within New South Wales' (NSW) inter-regional public transport system while recommending plausible courses of action to improve these services.

CountryLink may be perceived as an economically efficient means of transportation, however the lengthy routes and detours, along with untimely arrivals, portray this service as unreliable and impractical. The limited public transport options, arrivals and accessibility functions within regional NSW are, at present, restraining the possibilities of inter-regional public transport patronage. Finally, the operations performed by local councils may be extended to ensure state and federal bodies consider the public transport issues and needs of their regional communities.

## 2. Background

Public transport has been a cardinal issue confronting Australia's public policy for numerous years. It has been recognised that Australia's system of public transport, due to the geographical nexus of Australia, is simply inadequate (ACF, 2011; Matthews, 2009).

In comparison to other developed nations, it is unarguably substandard, with reliance on cars (car dependence being quite problematic, creating social and environmental challenges) and insufficient government attention to the infrastructure and services of public transport (ACF, 2011, p.3; NCOSS, 2012, p. 13).

Action for Public Transport NSW (APT NSW) is an advocacy group representing the needs, inequalities and challenges currently faced by public transport patrons (APT, 2012). Whilst it is clear that there is increased recognition for the need for vast public transport improvements, this is not reflected within the execution of the NSW Government's policy making.

Policies such as The 2012 Long Term Transport Master Plan, a "20 year long term, comprehensive integrated strategy for all modes of transport across NSW" have been designed by the NSW Government in response to the growth of the NSW populace and cost of travel (Transport for NSW, 2012). However, this policy does not demonstrate a clear focus on public transport, instead emphasising on concerns regarding car dependency, such as the upgrading of motor highways.

Action for Public Transport NSW assert that a more substantial focus was placed on public transport could combat numerous issues (such as the negative implications of not providing adequate public transport options for marginalised groups), and in turn, an overarching strategy could be

implemented to effectively upgrade the public transport system, presenting it as the more attractive option.

### **3. How CountryLink services can be improved**

CountryLink is a vital service that provides access to numerous Australians that travel inter-regionally. It delivers a method of public transport that creates access to employment, health services, education, and community services (CountryLink, 2012a). However, whilst this service is available, it must be substantially improved in order to become the preferred choice of transport, otherwise termination or degradation of the service will lead to equity injustices.

Like any other mode of public transportation, CountryLink should consider more than the process of patron transportation. The Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) (2011) state “public transport is viewed as more than simply a means of getting from A to B - it is about a complete experience for the customer” (p. 5). In order to ensure that customers perceive CountryLink’s services as an attractive and preferential mode of transport, outstanding customer service should be considered a core priority.

#### **3.1 Recommendation 1: Examination of customer service**

Sharpe (2010) asserts:

The issues raised by community members for improvement [of CountryLink] centred on the need for a more proactive and engaging approach to customer service, a greater awareness of passengers with special needs, a desire for more visibility of staff, timing and style of public address announcements while on board, proactive management of difficult passengers and the need for on board staff to assist passengers on unstaffed stations on and off the train and with their luggage. (p. 7.).

Acknowledging this, an examination of the level of customer service provided by staff should occur. The current level of customer service must be examined, followed by staff training where flaws of customer service are



identified. Results and feedback of staff performance are to be inspected to establish an understanding of the customer experience, ensuring CountryLink develops and improves its operations (Sharpe, 2010).

### **3.2 Recommendation 2: Review of service timeliness**

“CountryLink aims to have 78% of services arrive at their destinations within 10 minutes of the scheduled time” however, this is not always the case. Statistics show that the average time for timeliness is 59.9% (CountryLink, 2012b).

It is necessary for public transport to be efficient in order to ensure that it is the preferred option. Therefore, it is recommended that the timeliness of CountryLink services, and the causes of delays, should be reviewed. If these services are not able to achieve its 78% timeliness target, other instruments should be adopted, such as identifiable service reports and updates with information readily available through appropriate technologies - such as smart phone applications with consistent updates.

## **4. How the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased**

### **4.1 Geographic transport disadvantage**

Transport disadvantage is a significant issue in outer-urban, regional and remote NSW. The funding priority of State Government has predominantly been directed toward metropolitan areas, resulting in considerably less focus on public transport implementation and maintenance outside these areas. The lack of funding for inter-regional transport systems is largely a result of the lack of a coordinated national approach to transport infrastructure (TTF, 2009).

Transport disadvantage can be defined as difficulty accessing transport due to availability of services, physical accessibility and socio-economic status (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Transport disadvantage occurs more frequently in certain sub-groups of the Australian population, but is highly prevalent in specific geographical locations such as outer-urban, rural and remote areas.

Two main factors contribute to transport disadvantage in regional areas, poor public transport infrastructure and a higher number of low-income households. Road transport is currently the dominant mode of transport in Australia, with 68% of all trips being made in private vehicles (BITRE, 2012). Australia has the second highest level of traffic per capita in the world (BITRE, 2012). This may be attributed to the high levels of transport disadvantage in outer-urban areas of Australia due to inadequate public transport options (Hurni, 2007).

There are serious deficiencies in the structure of public transport in NSW, with accessibility and service surplus in higher socioeconomic areas; areas that have less need for more cost effective transport. Areas that report high levels of private vehicle ownership are often considered to have adequate transport and thus governments can view these areas as being without need of additional public transport options, but what the government has failed to realise is that this high level of car ownership is forced by inadequate public transport. For further discussion, see page 10.

#### **4.1.1 Recommendation 3: Transport for NSW to engage in PR strategy to promote existing public transport options**

One of the key issues with the current public transport system is in its unreliability and inefficiency. People are not confident they can depend on the inconsistent NSW public transport options to get to their destination in an easy, comfortable and time-efficient manner. In order to increase the patronage of public transport services, it needs to be perceived as being of equal or greater efficiency as driving. Thus, through employing awareness campaigns to promote current inter-regional public transport options, profits toward these entities will increase and, consequently, the improvement of public transport facilities and an increase in destination arrival frequencies will become economically practical.

## **4.2 Transport disadvantage and the disabled**

Public transport within regional New South Wales and, indeed, most of Australia fails to implement adequate services and operations that facilitate the participation and access of disabled publics.

Currently, lacking viable transport options available for disabled persons impose transport disadvantage and social exclusion upon these citizens (Currie et al., 2009). As the Combined Pensioners & Superannuation Association of NSW explains “many in this group feel socially excluded because they have lost an important means of maintaining their independence and connection with their community” (2010, p.7).

This submission will specifically explore issues pertaining to the:

- Mobility restricted
- Hearing impaired

### **4.2.1 Mobility Restricted**

Publics that experience restrained physical mobility continue to be suppressed by public transport services. As Battelino & McClain explain “mobility restrictions due to age or a disability, permanent or temporary, can also result in transport disadvantage despite the presence of a local public transport system if that system cannot be accessed” (2011, p. 6).

All modes of public transport within NSW perform limited boarding and accessibility functions; trams inconsistently utilise accessibility ramps whilst similarly, buses and trains fail to exercise adequate vertical gap reduction (VCOSS, 2011, p. 9). Hence, for inter-regional public transport networks to be better integrated for the mobility restricted, these issues of accessibility must be expelled.

#### 4.2.2 Hearing impaired

Hearing impaired individuals face varying forms of adversity when accessing public transport networks. In terms of train access, the lacking availability of visual mediums to notify commuters of delays, cancellations or inaccessible replacements, alongside the inconsistency of staff assistant services, inflicts confusion and stress upon the hearing impaired (Rosier & McDonald, 2011, p. 8). While communication and assistance continues to lack throughout the public transport infrastructure of regional NSW, issues of access will persist to arise for hearing-impaired individuals.

#### **Recommendation 4: Extend and fulfil accessibility standards and targets**

The NSW Government's *Disabilities Standards for Accessible Public Transport Guidelines 2002* has established goals to reduce the transport disadvantage that disabled persons face but, unfortunately, NSW continues to fall behind their set targets (ComLaw, 2011). Currently, the target is set to achieve 55% public transport accessibility for buses and trains by the end of 2012; as of July 2010, merely 39% of these transport modes met accessibility standards (NCOSS, 2012, p. 17). Furthermore, this guideline fails to investigate the niche difficulties faced by the hearing-impaired publics, or explore the development of visual notifications. Thus, the NSW Government must extend their guidelines with consideration of the hearing-impaired, whilst also committing to achieving the current targets of accessibility that are established.

The implementation and support of additional programs, such as the Accessible Transport Action Plan (TNSW, 2008) will assist in ensuring this discrimination toward disabled persons is eliminated in a timely and effective manner.

## **5. The role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation network**

It is well established that Local Governments, whilst committed to the development and reform of public transport policy, do not have the sufficient financial resources required in order to most effectively meet the needs of their community (ALGA, 2006). For the purpose of this submission, the focus will be particularly with reference to regional Local Government Areas with a high level of transport disadvantage sufferers.

Whilst Transport for NSW is responsible for decision making, planning and policy, including “procuring transport services, infrastructure and freight” (Transport for NSW, 2012), Chapter 6 of the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW) delegates the responsibility of “provision, management or operation...[of] public transport services and facilities” (Austlii, 2012) to Local Governments.

As such, it is recommended that the most beneficial methods for local councils to improve the inter-regional public transportation network (acknowledging the pertinent financial and legislative limitations) are:

- Advocacy and community consultation
- Promotion of existing services

### **5.1 Recommendation 5. Advocacy and community consultation**

Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) puts forward that whilst a review of the sharing of state and federal transport taxation revenue is required, advocacy is a key responsibility of Local Government in response to inter-regional public transport problems (ALGA, 2010, p. 20).

Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils (2012) establishes, “Local government needs to be included in interagency groups to develop comprehensive transport planning solutions for individual regions”. Councils

cannot be responsible for the development of major rail or road supporting facilities, but they can advocate the specific public transport needs of their community and communicate this more clearly with State Government agencies.

Councils should confer with their community and undertake continued consultation as to the challenges faced as a result of inadequate of inter-regional public transport services as well as proposed solutions.

ALGA (2010) asserts that Councils should collect and provide State Government authorities “consistent data about the condition of local roads [and] other transport assets” (p. 17).

The Victorian Government’s *Meeting our Transport Challenges* (2006) outlined inter-regional public transport policy reforms designed to encourage an increase level of council participation in the public policy process in order to make “services more localised and relevant to communities” (p. 29).

The purpose of closer partnerships is to “have a significant positive impact on the quality of future planning and decision-making ”(2006, p. 29). By committing to engaging in community advocacy services, councils can better ensure the specific needs of their area are met.

## **5.2 Recommendation 6. Promotion of existing services**

Acknowledging the financial challenges faced by Local Government, APT NSW asserts “councils must actively promote what transport already exists, and do everything possible to improve the conditions for bus, ferry and train passengers,” (2002). By doing so, Councils can work with their communities to combat localised inter-regional transport problems at a grassroots level.

Such has been implemented in Victoria, where the State Government supported and encouraged Councils to make better use of existing transport resources between regions (Victorian Government, 2006).

By promoting existing modes of inter-regional transport services (such as CountryLink and buses), as well as providing the community with an abundance of relevant information and adequate amenities at terminals, councils can encourage increased public transport use and make access easier for those experiencing transport disadvantage.



## 6. Conclusion

The inter-regional public transport services within New South Wales are currently restrained and, indeed, inadequate for various citizens of this state. CountryLink services, means of travelling inter-regionally and the performance of Local Councils are in need of refinement. CountryLink, with merely 59% of journeys arriving in a timely manner, fails to gratify the needs of its commuters in an effective fashion. For CountryLink to improve its services, a review of its travel routes and procedures, and customer service policies, remains crucial.

Transport disadvantage continues to inflict those of regional residence and, additionally, of disabled condition. Inconsistent and inadequate public transport options within regional NSW discourage inter-regional commuting through public transports modes. For the increase in inter-regional public transport commuting to be achieved, an improvement in travel routes and arrival consistency is necessary – an awareness campaign of current public transport options will improve profits and assist in achieving such an objective. Those of disabled condition, namely the mobility restricted and hearing impaired, are provided with insufficient services to facilitate their involvement in public transport travel. Targets of increasing accessibility set by the *Disabilities Standards for Accessible Public Transport Guidelines 2002* fail to be met while, also, offering limited, or no, solution to the need of visual indicators for the hearing impaired. Hence, the revision of the *Disabilities Standards for Accessible Public Transport Guidelines 2002* and/or support of additional programmes regarding public transport accessibility are recommended.

Local Councils operate as a consultative entity for their regional publics and remain instrumental in developing policy that best suit the transport needs of their citizens. The improvement of the inter-regional public transport network can be achieved by these entities through consistent consultation with their citizens and relaying, and negotiating, the views of their publics to the NSW State Government. Additional to this data gathering function, Local Councils

may also act to publicise existing inter-regional public transport options, to ensure those with viable public transport options are aware of such services and not affected by transport disadvantage.

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## **8. Inquiry terms of reference**

This inquiry was self-referred. Resolution passed 7 March 2012, Minutes No 6, Item 2.

That the Committee inquire into how inter-regional public transport can better serve the needs of regional New South Wales.

Particular issues for consideration include:

- (a) how CountryLink services can be improved;
- (b) how network linkages between CountryLink train and coach services can be improved;
- (c) the potential for CountryLink services to carry light freight;
- (d) how CountryLink can be better utilised to increase tourism in New South Wales;
- (e) how the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased;
- (f) the extent to which regional public transport networks are integrated and how they can be better integrated;
- (g) the role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation networks; and
- (h) the type of buses and trains that will be required for the provision of regional passenger services in the future.

For the purposes of this inquiry, the Committee uses the term inter-regional travel to refer to travel between regional areas or between a regional area and a metropolitan area.

The Committee does not intend to consider the privatisation of existing government owned public transport, including CountryLink, as part of its inquiry.