

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Response to Regional Public Transport (Inquiry)

NSW Government – Legislative Assembly

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the Legislative Assembly as part of the Regional Public Transport Inquiry.

PDCN promotes universal access to all modes of public transport and the community, and would like to recommend the following:

- That there is no further replacement of CountryLink trains with coaches,
- That funding is provided for access improvements and maintenance of train stations in regional and rural NSW,
- That staffing levels on regional and rural train stations are not reduced, particularly at train stations that are not accessible or train stations that only provide access with assistance, and
- That CountryLink liaise with regional and rural local council and/ or local coordination staff from Ability Links NSW to ensure the most preferred location of bus stops and continuous paths of travel.¹

DISCUSSION

With an ageing population it has become increasingly more important that community facilities provide universal access to all modes of public transport and community facilities. As a consequence PDCN would recommend the following:

- That there is no further replacement of CountryLink trains with coaches,
- That funding is provided for access improvements and maintenance of train stations in regional and rural NSW,

¹ NSW Department of Family and Community Services- Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Ability Links NSW
http://www.adhc.nsw.gov.au/individuals/inclusion_and_participation/ability_links_nsw/ability_links_nsw_coordinators

- That staffing levels on regional and rural train stations is not reduced, particularly at train stations that are not accessible or train stations that only provide access with assistance, and
- That CountryLink liaise with regional and rural local council and/ or local coordination staff from Ability Links NSW to ensure the most preferred location of bus stops and continuous paths of travel.

CountryLink trains and coaches carry almost two million passengers per annum to 365 locations across regional and rural locations that provide either by train and/or coach access.

Research conducted by the Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) asked respondents to evaluate a range of aspects relevant to travelling on CountryLink trains and coaches, including the following issues: customer service, comfort and safety, arrangements for passenger luggage, connectivity with other modes of public transport, boarding facilities, seating and toilet facilities. Survey recipients came from a variety of NSW locations across the four CountryLink rail services, with a significant number located on the Blue Mountains and Western lines, highlighting the many difficulties associated with the limited provision of accessible public transport in the Central West, Far West, and Orana localities. CountryLink services were used for the following purposes: business, medical and health, recreational and social, visiting friends and family. ²

Customer services such as assisting a passenger with luggage were evaluated more highly by passengers using trains rather than coaches. Passengers commenting on coaches were a lot more critical of the limited provision of meals, entrance and emergency facilities, seating and sleeping amenities and toilet facilities. PDCN was not surprised to see that feedback regarding the connectivity between the train, coach and other forms of public transport as considered negatively.

This survey conducted by PDCN identified a preference for traveling by CountryLink trains rather than using coaches. This was similar to findings in a number of other

² Physical Disability Council of NSW (2012) CountryLink survey - <http://www.pdcnsw.org.au/index.php/Consultations/specific-issue-consultations.html>

reviews, including the NSW government parliamentary inquiry conducted in 2010,³ and the national review into accessible public transport in 2007.⁴ The following quotation from the NSW government parliamentary inquiry reinforces the findings of PDCN:

*'Of particular concern were the comments made at nearly every consultation that the coaches are very hard for those with mobility difficulties to get on and off. While all the coaches are able to "kneel" or lower themselves closer to the ground the 3 -5 steps for many passengers is very difficult. It is noted that all coaches have a wheelchair lift however there were issues reported about the willingness of drivers to use it and that especially for non wheelchair passengers, the lift is really not suitable.'*⁵

Whilst PDCN recognises that CountryLink trains are costly, and that government maybe considering replacing CountryLink trains with coaches, or increasing passenger fees, PDCN is not in favour of replacing CountryLink coaches with trains, but would prefer that community transport received additional funding and was used to replace trains if needed. This suggestion to replace CountryLink trains with community transport has been recommended in the past as a potential strategy worth considering as part a ministerial inquiry into sustainable public transport.⁶

Currently 94% of train stations provide access across regional and rural NSW, with a number that require a carer or friend to provide assistance to passenger. PDCN considers the term used by NSW Transport: 'Assisted access. May be accessible with help from a friend or carer, as unclear and not providing complete independence, and that these train stations should not be considered as accessible.

Universal physical access is not provided at the following CountryLink train stations:

- Tarago on the Southern Line, and
- Mt Victoria, Euabalong West and Darnick on the Western Line.

³ NSW Ministry of Transport – Penny Sharpe MLC (2010) CountryLink

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Infrastructure and Transport (2007) Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport - Allens Consulting Group

⁵ NSW Ministry of Transport – Penny Sharpe MLC (2010) CountryLink

⁶ NSW Ministry of Transport (2003) Ministerial Inquiry into Sustainable Public Transport in NSW

PDCN believes that the Blue Mountains line is not considered as part of the CityRail or the Countrylink Easyaccess Programs, and that the Blue Mountains line is just an extension of the Western line. Funding for access improvements on the Blue Mountains line is urgently needed from either of these funding programs as few stations on this line provide access. PDCN considers Mt Victoria train station as a priority for access improvements as it provides an interchange with a number of country towns that only provide coach access, with additionally stations located on the Blue Mountains Line.

Without complete access to the train, people needing access to board the train from the train station require station staff who can access a ramp, and consequently station staff are still required to access the ramp or assist with passenger luggage. Subsequently PDCN would consider taking station staff from train stations that are completely inaccessible or where assisted travel is requested, as particularly undesirable.

To ensure connectivity between the train station and other modes of public transport, accessible infrastructure and continuous accessible path of travel needs to be planned and designed. Consequently PDCN would recommend that CountryLink and bus operators liaise with local councils and staff through the Ability Links program (shortly to be recruited as part of the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care) to ensure that bus stop and taxi stand infrastructure provide safe convenient access to transport, pedestrian, parking and retail access.