

**Submission
No 48**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NSW**

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Physical Disability Council of NSW
Ordinary People Ordinary Lives

Submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee
on Transport and Infrastructure

Inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and
Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional NSW

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Who is the Physical Disability Council of NSW?

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) is the peak body representing people with physical disabilities across New South Wales. This includes people with a range of physical disability issues, from young children and their representatives to aged people, who are from a wide range of socio-economic circumstances and live in metropolitan, rural and regional areas of NSW.

Our core function is to influence and advocate for the achievement of systemic change to ensure the rights of all people with a physical disability are improved and upheld.

The objectives of PDCN are:

- To educate, inform and assist people with physical disabilities in NSW about the range of services, structure and programs available that enable their full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship
- To develop the capacity of people with physical disability in NSW to identify their own goals, and the confidence to develop a pathway to achieving their goals (ie: self-advocate).
- To educate and inform stakeholders (ie: about the needs of people with a physical disability) so they are able to achieve and maintain full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.

Introduction:

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the provision of accessible, affordable transport in rural and regional NSW. As part of this inquiry for the Committee on Community Services within the NSW Legislative Assembly, PDCN has conducted a survey to assist with addressing the terms of reference of this inquiry. The terms of reference are as listed below:

- Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW;
- Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW;
- Potential strategies to improve access, including better alignment between different modes of transport, available routes and time tabling generally;
- Support that can be provided to seniors and disadvantaged people to assist with the costs of private transport where public transport is either unavailable or unable to meet the needs of these groups; and
- Any other related matters.¹

Implementation of findings from this inquiry will assist State Parties comply with Article 9- Accessibility of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the National Disability Strategy 2010- 2020, and the Transport for NSW Disability Action Plan 2012- 2017 by providing improved links to transport modes that facilitate greater

¹ NSW Legislative Assembly- Committee of Community Services (June 2016) Terms of Reference

access, inclusion and participation in the community particularly for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW.

Discussion

The 2012 review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (DSAPT) reinforces the need for State and Territory governments to investigate issues regarding access to transport for people with disability and older people living in rural and regional locations. The past review of the DSAPT in 2012 explains that it has obtained little feedback directly from people with disability, and as a consequence issues and concerns regarding access to public transport in rural and regional locations have been provided from the following stakeholders;

- Local Councils located in rural and regional NSW;
- Local Government NSW
- Individual and systemic disability organisations;
- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC);
- NSW Local Government Sector;
- Non Government Organisations located in rural and regional locations; and
- Specialist Non Government Organisations such as the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS).

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) conducted a survey to identify barriers to accessing transport. This survey targeted people with disability living in remote NSW (Region 1) and regional NSW (Region 2), and more than 120 surveys were obtained. The one survey obtained from within the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area (Region 3) was excluded.

1. Region 1- Remote NSW- Far West
2. Region 2- Regional NSW- Central West, Hunter, Illawarra, Mid North Coast, Murray- Lower Darling, New England North West, Northern Rivers, Orana, Riverina, South East NSW, Southern Highlands and Tablelands, and the Blue Mountains
3. Region 3- Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area (incorporating Campbelltown to the south, Penrith in the west, and Gosford and the Central Coast to the north)

The following issues and concerns were identified in the surveys;

- Availability of public and private accessible bus services in remote and regional NSW;
- Quality of bus stop infrastructure;
- Frequency of bus services;
- Access to NSW Countrylink trains and coaches;
- Access to rail infrastructure;
- Access to Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATS) and the
- Provision of Community Transport.

PDCN would like to reinforce the importance of affordable, accessible transport with good connectivity to facilitate access and participation in the community. Without access to transport then access to employment, educational providers, community

resources, friends and family cannot be easily accessed. Survey respondents #52 and #80 sum up the importance of transport connectivity with the following feedback:

*'With very, very few accessible buses in the area and even with the taxi subsidy it is very expensive to travel from my home to anywhere, especially in other towns where most of the medical specialists are. Socialising is out of the question, as it becomes too expensive. In so many ways this is limiting my ability to do things that keep me as healthy as I want to be and also minimises my ability to take part in my community and contribute to it'*²

*'Public transport in this area, whether it be buses or taxis is very hard to access for me as a person confined to a wheelchair. Working 4 days a week from 9am to 2.30pm it is very hard to access a Wheelchair Accessible Taxi at the times when I need them because of allocated school runs. As a result most of the time I end up making my own way from work. This can be very awkward at times and very unfair I come from a town which has 6 wheelchair friendly cabs. I feel that at least one could be set aside for those of us that are trying to get to and from work on time. Community transport, while they do have wheelchair accessibility, do not pick up those who are going to work. It is focused on those who are elderly in the community eg shopping trips and planned outing trips mainly.'*³

The 2012 review of the DSAPT states that due to the lack of requirement for private bus operators to report on compliance levels it is difficult to determine the impact of communities reliant on private bus services.

The review also acknowledges that fewer bus services are available in rural and regional locations, as noted about 50% of bus operators are private and provide bus services with only ten vehicles, and that about 19% of private bus operators provide services with fewer than five vehicles.

Data from private bus operators located in rural and regional areas was inconsistent and hence PDCN believes not reliable. Transport operators reported that 17% of buses provided wheelchair accessibility but when the bus timetables were examined 30% of bus routes had wheelchair access. PDCN is wary about the large inconsistency in this data and believes that it needs to be reviewed to ensure clarity.

In the past year approximately 40% of survey respondents have used accessible buses, and of these about 60% reported buses as being very or somewhat accessible. Although some survey respondents considered bus transport as accessible, access to bus transport on the whole was reported as being infrequent in many rural and regional locations.

It is reported that there are approximately 37,200 bus stops located in the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area and 10,000 bus stops outside Sydney. Due to the larger distances travelled between bus stops in regional localities, bus infrastructure has not

² Physical Disability Council of NSW- Regional and Remote Transport Survey (Survey number 52)

³ Physical Disability Council of NSW- Regional and Remote Transport Survey (Survey no. 80)

been seen as a priority for many Local Governments. The DSAPT has put pressure on local councils to improve bus stop infrastructure and this has been particularly difficult for local councils based in regional locations. This need has been identified as part of previous reviews of the DSAPT. In 2007 and 2012 both reviews have recommended funding for this from the Commonwealth government advising that funding for projects was a matter for state and territory governments to consider, but agreed to consider the eligibility criteria for transport and infrastructure programs to ensure no inappropriate exclusions applied to projects that would support compliance with the DSAPT.

The NSW government has introduced the Country Passenger Transport Infrastructure Grants Scheme to provide funding for the capital costs of infrastructure projects to enhance safety, convenience and accessibility, for the installation of bus stops and taxi shelters.

Due to the large amount of bus stops in rural and regional locations still needing bus stop improvements, PDCN would recommend that the CPTIGS be available annually rather than biannually.

When considering the frequency of buses in rural and regional locations, accessible bus travel is commonly not available out of business hours, nor on public holidays. It is most frequently available on weekdays during office hours. Where accessible bus services are limited, PDCN would suggest that accessible buses be allocated equally around all the different bus routes and no one bus route is selected out and treated differently.

It is recommended that for accessible bus routes that both arrival and departure trips are timetabled to ensure that passengers are provided with whole of journey services. This will ensure that all passengers can plan on the continuity of accessible bus services.

Recommendation 1: To ensure greater availability of accessible bus transport in rural and regional locations PDCN would recommend:

- I. That contractual arrangements between Transport for NSW and private bus operators in rural and regional locations be established to provide an annual reporting mechanism;**
- II. That Transport for NSW advise the NSW Bus and Coach Association on compliance issues with the DSAPT to ensure that all bus operators are familiar with regulatory responsibilities.**
- III. That Transport for NSW determine an implementation schedule for bus operators and people with disability are familiar with improvements to accessible public transport;**
- IV. That the approval of recommendations made to the Commonwealth Government are included within the next NSW Transport Disability Action Plan; and**
- V. That Transport for NSW increase the availability of funds through the Country Passenger Transport Infrastructure Grants Scheme so that the scheme is available on a yearly basis rather only available biannually.**
- VI. In the past PDCN has advised the government of concerns regarding access to Countrylink coaches and that it is recommended that train stations are not closed and replaced with coaches.**

The review conducted in 2012 of the DSAPT refers to the lack of feedback regarding coaches. In rural and regional locations trains have frequently been replaced by coaches. Feedback from the PDCN includes feedback from survey respondent and this addresses a common complaint concerning buses and coaches as suggested by Respondent #102:

'I would use public transport more if more were available and also if the drivers did not drive so roughly. One of the drivers the passengers call 'the white knuckle ride' because you need to hang on so tight your knuckles go white! This is really unacceptable. And also my wheelchair cannot be anchored. It really is not safe having to ride unanchored.' ⁴

The Commonwealth Government has agreed in principle to the development of mode specific guidelines for taxis, coaches, trains, trams, ferries and commercial aircraft.

The recent survey conducted by PDCN investigated the accessibility of the following features at the coach stop and accessibility within the coach:

- Accessible path of travel to the coach stop
- Parking facilities
- Coach stop signage
- Coach stop seating
- Bus stop shelter
- Transport interchange facilities
- Opal facilities
- Toilet facilities
- Public telephone

It is recognised that not all coach stops or vehicles had all the features identified above but where surveys did comment, the accessible path of travel from the occupant's home to the coach stop, and the accessible toilet facilities were the most problematic features identified.

Findings of a survey conducted by PDCN in 2012 into NSW Countrylink services, indicated that at that time passengers were critical of the lack of meal facilities, concerns about the poor attentiveness to emergency egress, seating and sleeping amenities and bathroom facilities. People with disability generally preferred to use trains rather than coaches. The following concerns were identified regarding coach travel in the 2016 survey conducted by PDCN:

'The aisle ways are not very wide and the steps in can be quite steep. There is also not much room between seats and in the toilet.' ⁵

The decision made by the Federal Court involving Murrays Australia where Murrays coaches claimed unjustifiable hardship and claimed that they were unable to take a passenger from Sydney to Canberra because the passenger required wheelchair access into bus was later defeated. PDCN believes that this legal precedence may now

⁴ Physical Disability Council of NSW- Regional and Remote Transport in NSW (Survey No.102)

⁵ Physical Disability Council of NSW (2016) Regional and Remote Transport Survey No.4

see the mode specific guidelines for buses and coaches to require increased accessibility requirements for coach line operators.⁶

Currently access is only provided at Springwood, Katoomba, Lithgow and Bathurst stations on the Blue Mountains Line. When this train line was still considered as part of Sydney Trains it would compete for transport access funding with other train stations located in Sydney. With the selection criteria used to identify stations in Sydney needing access improvements, stations on the Blue Mountains Line never rated highly.

Now, however the train stations on this line are considered as part of NSW Trains where the selection criteria for access improvements is slightly different. As a consequence, with the limited availability of wheelchair accessible taxis, and the lack of public and private bus services, PDCN would recommend additional funding be allocated to the implementation of improved accessibility at train stations on the Blue Mountains Line.

Recommendation 2: To ensure greater access to NSW Trains by replacing an increasing reliance on coaches in rural and regional NSW PDCN would recommend the following:

- I. That Transport for NSW liaise and provide assistance where research is required to the National Accessible Public Transport Advisory Committee (NAPTAC) and the Rail Standards Working Group (RSWG) for the development of rail specific modal guidelines.**
- II. That Transport for NSW establish a register of old and new rolling stock.**
- III. That the minimum standards for rail infrastructure be clearly identified in the Transport for NSW Disability Action Plan and an easy to read FAQs.**
- IV. That Transport for NSW cease the closure of train stations located in rural and regional NSW by replacing train stations with coach services.**
- V. That Transport for NSW stop reducing the availability of staff on train stations that do not provide full accessibility and assistance may be required at rural and regional locations;**
- VI. That additional funding be provided to immediately improve accessibility to at least two additional train stations on the Blue Mountains Line between Lapstone and Katoomba.**

Currently Transport for NSW supports the transport taxi needs of people with disability living in rural and regional locations with the implementation of the following:

- Wheelchair Accessible Taxi (WAT) licenses are provided free to taxi operators;
- WAT vehicles can be driven for up to ten years;
- WAT drivers are fully reimbursed for the costs of specialist driver training and assessment costs;
- WAT operators are able to purchase vehicles interest free;
- WAT passengers are entitled to a maximum subsidy of \$60.00; and
- WAT drivers obtain \$8.47 for all WATS trips booked through the Wheelchair Accessible Taxis Driver Incentive Scheme.

⁶ Haraksin vs. Murrays Australia Ltd Federal Court 2013

The proportion of WAT taxis per standard taxis is 19.8% in rural and regional locations and 24% in the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area. Subsequently even with these incentives in rural and regional locations the proportion of WATs is not as high as for the remainder of NSW. It needs to be recognised that the proportion of WAT per regular taxis varies substantially depending on location, with as only limited WAT taxis in some locations (such as in the Blue Mountains precinct) compared to Port Macquarie area where the proportion of WATS is quite high.

The Point to Point Report review supports the adoption of a provider-neutral scheme where the future availability of WATs will not be the sole responsibility of one government department but with future reform the availability of WAT in NSW will become a whole community responsibility, including both State and Commonwealth governments, private and not-for-profit organisations.

It concerns PDCN that in the Point to Point Transport review the NSW State Government does not appear to see how a provider-neutral scheme may impact on the availability of WAT in different regional locations. In regional locations that are not currently resourced adequately with WAT or accessible vehicles that can easily be converted into wheelchair accessible vehicles, it is difficult to image that commercial organisations will be interested in investing funds in a location that is poorly resourced.

Following the adoption of a provider-neutral scheme it would also be necessary to establish performance criteria and standards that comply with the DSAPT for WAT in the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area and for regional NSW.

Furthermore, with the adoption of a provider-neutral scheme, without State Government leadership it is hard to see how recommendation 13 from the 2007 review of the DSAPT will be implemented in regional NSW. This recommendation identifies that the Transport Standards be amended so that new community transport vehicles with more than 12 seats have greater capacity to comply with the DSAPT by 2017. Whilst the Commonwealth Government has considered this recommendation, and does not consider it as a priority due to the availability of other forms of public transport, PDCN believes that this recommendation should be considered in remote locations in NSW where community transport may be available but no other types of public transport. This may be so in locations with a population less than 30,000.

Recommendation 3: PDCN believes that the NSW State Government needs to consider the following:

- I. The impact of a provider-neutral scheme on the availability of WAT and how this availability may differ in different parts of NSW.**
- II. Obtain advice from the Attorney General regarding minimum performance criteria and standards for the reforms identified in the Point to Point Transport report for WAT and Community Transport.**
- III. Ensure that all Community Transport vehicles with more than 12 seats located in remote NSW are made accessible by 2017.**