

**Submission  
No 47**

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

**Organisation:** Illawarra Forum Inc  
**Name:** Mr Nicky Sloan  
**Position:** CEO  
**Date Received:** 21 July 2016



14th July 2016

NSW Legislative Assembly  
Committee on Community Services

**Submission to Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW**

**About the Illawarra Forum**

The Illawarra Forum is the peak body working for community services organisations and for communities in the Illawarra and the Shoalhaven. We support community organisations, promote expertise and innovation in community development, foster industry development and advocate for social justice.

For more than twenty years, the Illawarra Forum has taken a leadership role in the local community services sector, which currently consists of more than 300 organisations across the Illawarra and Shoalhaven areas of NSW.

As part of our leadership role, we engage with those organisations, services and individuals engaged in supporting senior and disadvantaged community members to collect their opinion, expertise and recommendations.

The Illawarra Forum works closely with numerous organisations which provide support to vulnerable people across the region including:

- Services for individuals and families with multiple layers of social and financial disadvantage;
- Home Support services;
- Residential services;
- Services for people with disability;
- Support for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault;
- Youth work programs;
- Social housing and homelessness services;
- Community health services, including mental health and drug/alcohol services;
- Community development and community capacity building programs.

The Illawarra Forum welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Committee on Community Services.

## About The Area

The Illawarra and Shoalhaven covers approximately 5784 square kilometres sprawled along the south east coast of New South Wales. The region is extremely diverse, with urban centres such as Wollongong City (NSW's third largest city), Shellharbour City, and Nowra; large suburban sprawl, many outlying villages, and rural areas.

**Wollongong** Local Government Area covers an area from Helensburgh in the north to Lake Illawarra in the south. Wollongong has a population of approximately 200,000, spans an area of 714km sq, and is the third largest city in New South Wales (Sydney and Newcastle are 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> largest), and the tenth largest city in Australia.

**Shellharbour** Local Government Area ranges from Albion Park Rail to Dunmore, has a population of approximately 66,000, and spans an area of 154km sq.

**Kiama** Local Government Area covers an area of 256km sq from Minnamurra River in the north to Gerroa in the south. Approximately 21,000 people live in the Kiama LGA.

**Shoalhaven** Local Government Area, with a population of approximately 98,000, consists of forty-nine towns and villages over an area of 4,568 km sq on the South Coast of New South Wales. This geographic area also includes the Jervis Bay Territory with an important Aboriginal community at Wreck Bay.

## THE ISSUES

Transport disadvantage is a significant issue throughout much of the Illawarra, and in particular in suburbs with low socio-economic indicators, such as Port Kembla, Warrawong, Warilla and Albion Park; and Bomaderry, Nowra, Ulladulla, and the Bay and Basin area.

The diversity of settlement and the vast distances has resulted in many people in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven experience geographic and social isolation. Among the groups most vulnerable to this isolation are:

- young people;
- people living with physical or mental illness or disability;
- people living on Centrelink benefits, pensions or low incomes;
- older people;
- carers of older people and people with a disability; and
- people experiencing an emergency or crisis.

Access to transport is a major issue for many people living in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven. The area is spread over a vast distance and access to reliable and affordable public transport is inequitable throughout the region, with some areas having good access to free transport,

and others having access to only one bus service daily, with fares which make regular transport inaccessible.

In the northern Illawarra, north-south travel is relatively achievable with access to rail and bus transport. The upper northern Illawarra even enjoys a free bus which operates regularly in both directions on a loop from Fairy Meadow to Wollongong Station, Wollongong University, Wollongong Hospital, the Central Business District and the Innovation Campus.

However for most of the region, east-west transport is difficult and inter-suburb transport extremely challenging.

The Shoalhaven is an area which experiences considerable transport disadvantage, with transport from many outlying towns and villages limited to one daily service in and out. Rail access is minimal, as Countrylink services stop at Bomaderry. As Bomaderry is in the far north east of the region, this leaves the majority of the Shoalhaven with little or no access to public transport.

For many people in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, lack of public transport forces them into financial hardship in order to maintain a motor vehicle. Often the most vulnerable people are forced to purchase and maintain older, inefficient, and unreliable vehicles because that is all they can afford. However, the running costs of such vehicles are inevitably so high that they have to make unconscionable sacrifices in order to maintain the vehicle such as choosing between whether to eat, or have fuel for the car.

#### **Case Study**

'John' is a young man in his late 20s who has been unemployed since leaving school at 17. 'John' has a partner and three young children and lives at Sanctuary Point in the Bay and Basin area of the Shoalhaven.

Some months ago, 'John' was fortunate enough to secure a full time job as a factory hand with a company located at South Nowra. He earns a low wage, but enjoys the work and particularly enjoys the comradeship of his fellow workers.

The only bus out of Sanctuary Point in the early morning is at 6:35am, and this does not get him to South Nowra in time to walk the 20 minutes to his worksite before his shift begins.

'John' has no choice but to drive the family's only car – an older model sedan for the 60 km round trip. Due to their tight budget, he is often unable to buy sufficient petrol for the week. Therefore, several times a week, 'John' will spend the night in his car, rather than drive home.

This impacts on his family, who not only miss having him at home, but are also trapped at home because they have no vehicle.

For many vulnerable people, however, car ownership is not an option. For example, many older people who have driven all their lives find themselves without transport when they are not granted a driver's licence at their biannual driving assessment, or many people with a disability or medical condition are not able to drive. For many of these vulnerable people, lack of a motor vehicle leads to inability to access educational, employment, social and cultural opportunities; as well as lack of access to vital services including health and wellbeing services.

In many cases, even where public transport is available, because of the distances in the region, the fares are unaffordable for vulnerable people. For example, the fare from Sanctuary Point to Nowra is \$12.50 one way. Sanctuary Point is an area which has reasonably affordable rental properties, but there is no industry in the area, and few employment opportunities. The closest town with any employment options is Nowra, but this means someone trying to move from unemployment into the workforce would have to pay \$125.00 per week in bus fares. This would be a significant impost on the income of someone who was working part time, or on the minimum wage.

#### **Case Study**

'Mary' has lived with a disability since birth. She lived in group homes in her youth but worked very hard on developing living skills to be able to live independently. She has a part time job in a village near Wollongong and lives on her own in a unit. Mary is unable to drive, so relies on public transport. She requires a walking frame at all times to assist her mobility.

'Mary' was injured on her way to work one day. The bus driver had not pulled up close enough to the curb for Mary to step from the curb onto the bus. Instead Mary had to step down into the gutter and plant her walking frame on the bottom step and try to pull herself up into the bus. She fell and injured herself resulting in a trip to hospital, significant time off work, and self-reported feelings of frustration and social isolation.

'Mary' reported this was not a one-off incident. On many occasions, she advised, bus drivers who had a manual ramp would not get out of the bus to put the ramp down. Further, they would not get off their seat to assist her to get up the bus stairs, and if they were running late would often verbally hurry her along, making her more flustered and worsening her mobility.

'Mary' also advised that sometimes she would be at the bus stop for hours waiting for a bus with mobility access before she would get on. 'Mary' feels that bus drivers don't understand her needs and should have some education and disability training so they are better able to support people with mobility issues.

Despite the significant lack of access to public transport, there appears to be a disproportionate investment in public transport between Sydney and regional areas.

***Illawarra Forum recommends that investment in public transport be commensurate with population growth.***

#### **A Community Worker's Comment**

I work with disadvantaged families, especially single mums who have no vehicle or other family to support them. Often they find there is an issue caused by lack of transport.

The only way some of these families can get access to a bus service is the school bus which comes in the morning and they have to stay in town for the day before catching another bus home in the afternoon. This can be very difficult and distressing - especially when they have young children.

Some examples of difficulties caused by the lack of public transport are:

- Absence of viable public transport to travel to health and medical services. For example, a resident in Ulladulla needed to attend mental health appointments in Sydney, which meant they had to leave Ulladulla by 4am. There is no public transport, so without the support of family or friends, attendance at these vital appointments would have been impossible;
- Lack of viable transport to enable disadvantaged people to take advantage of educational opportunities including preschool, primary and secondary schools, Tertiary education such as TAFE and University. For example, many young people from the Shellharbour LGA are keen to attend alternative education offerings at Five Islands (Illawarra) Senior College. However, if they don't have motor vehicle access for the 20 minutes' drive, the public transport option takes a train and two buses and a one kilometre walk for a total of 1 hour and 13 minutes each way.
- Inability to access training including work experience and apprenticeships;
- Lack of viable transport to enable disadvantaged people to take advantage of employment opportunities. For example, there are employment opportunities in the industrial zone at South Nowra, but no public transport accesses the area.
- Inability to participate in social and community events, which leads to social isolation and increased incidence and severity of mental illness.
- Increased difficulty and danger for women and families escaping domestic violence. This is particularly difficult in areas of the Shoalhaven when a woman finds the courage to escape her violent partner, she often doesn't have a large window of opportunity and the lack of public transport can prove a hindrance in availing of that opportunity. For example, if there is only one bus out of an area (and in many cases this is the school bus), it can be available only at inconvenient times, and can also favour the perpetrator, who would only have to monitor the bus stop once a day to prevent the family's escape from terror and violence.

### Feedback from Shoalhaven-based disability service provider

- No Opal cards are able to be used in the Shoalhaven on buses.
- Clients with a disability cannot use their concession opal cards on private buses and have to pay a minimum of \$15 each way from the Vincentia area to Nowra.
- Travel time - To catch a bus into Nowra from outlying villages can take over two hours for a one trip, and services are limited to one or two a day. This means for someone to get into Nowra for an appointment they often have to arrive hours early.
- Areas such as Worrigeer have no bus services at all.

Viable public transport is fundamental to communities being resilient. Its members should have access to health and other services, education, and employment. Such access increases opportunity to enjoy health and wellbeing, and to engage in social and community activities.

### Case Study (From a service provider's perspective)

As a service provider I wanted an elderly isolated client to access a social group. Community transport is funded to provide transport to social groups however their buses only picks clients up at the public road kerb - it does not drive into estates such as housing estates. This older person lives in a housing block which is built on a slope and cannot walk up the hill to the kerb to get on the bus.

On occasions I tried to arrange Community Transport to pick the person up via individual transport (volunteer using their own car) however this was refused as the funding did not cover individual funding to attend social groups.

Catching a Taxi even with Taxi Vouchers was too expensive. Depending on the distance an older person could pay \$20 plus each way to get to the group support and then on top of this a fee for the day \$20 +. If they also need to visit the GP regularly then social support groups are well down on their priority list.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable more equitable access to public transport in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, the Illawarra Forum recommends:

- *Shoalhaven free shuttle service, similar to the existing free 'Gong Shuttle'. This free shuttle would link the Bomaderry Train Station with Nowra CBD, TAFE Campuses, University of Wollongong Shoalhaven Campus, and Shoalhaven Hospital (enabling cancer patients from out of the region to take advantage of services at the Cancer Care Centre at Shoalhaven Hospital);*
- *Improved community access to public transport in order to meet the needs of transport disadvantaged residents and the ageing population;*
- *Increased frequency and improved reliability of rail services to and from Sydney. This will improve access to employment opportunities and health and other services;*



- *Fare parity, as enjoyed in Sydney;*
- *Broaden the Regional Excursion Daily Ticket program to include people on Newstart and Youth Allowance. This will enable disadvantaged young people to travel for \$2.50 per day and increase access to educational and employment opportunities;*
- *Extension of the South Coast Rail line south to Ulladulla – or at least identify and protect a future rail corridor to enable the line to be extended in future. This would not only improve access for Shoalhaven residents, but would help to build the vital tourism industry in the area;*
- *Ensure people working on public transport are educated about the issues faced by vulnerable people and receive disability training so they are better able to support people with mobility issues*

### **Case Study**

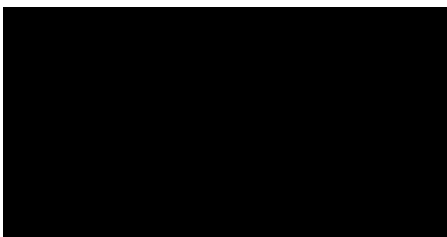
'Peter' is a retired man who, along with his wife, has for many years been an active participant in his community and a regular volunteer with several local organisations. In fact, both 'Peter' and his wife have been nominated for and received awards for their community and volunteer work.

The couple live in Albion Park, a suburb in the south west of the Illawarra area. 'Peter's' wife has never driven, and has always relied on him to take her to all of her activities, including grocery shopping, medical appointments, and social engagements.

Several years ago, 'Peter' surrendered his driver's licence due to health concerns. Since then, both he and his wife have had to reduce their participation in the community and volunteer activities which they love. Peter observed sadly that a trip which would once have taken him twenty minutes to drive, now involved two buses and a one-hour-and-fifteen-minute trip. That exhausting trip, plus the lack of timely services means that the couple no longer participate as actively in community life.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW. Please feel free to contact this office for further information.

Yours sincerely,



Nicky Sloan  
**CEO**  
**Illawarra Forum Inc**